

To Placate or Provoke?
A Critical Review of the Disciplines
Approach to History Curriculum

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Thirteen years ago history educator Bob Davis said that there is no point in teaching history that does not speak to the modern experience. He emphasized that we are in the process of building “from the bottom-up” what a history that speaks to our modern experience would look like (1995, p. 9). Between then and now, there has been gradual development of a “new” history for the future in Canadian history curriculum, with a focus on primary source investigation and historical consciousness. Proponents of this approach have made a claim to what history should look like for the modern experience, but without anyone questioning what “modern experience” they are actually supporting. This approach began in Britain with the work of Lee, Ashby, and Dickenson in the 1990s (Ashby, Lee, & Dickinson, 1997; 2000; Lee, Dickinson, & Ashby, 1997) and has been significantly expanded and theorized in Canada due to the efforts of Peter Seixas (Seixas, 2004b; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000). In this paper, I argue that rather than provoking and challenging how we come to know ourselves and others in the world, this approach to history curriculum maintains a neoliberal ethic of separation and

surveillance in our “modern experience” and in doing so placates the learning of difficult knowledges, knowledges that will allow us to understand and connect with others, in our study of the past.

Traditionally, history curriculum has typified Miller and Seller’s (1990) description of the *transmission* orientation to curriculum: rote learning with a canon of names and dates poured into students’ heads for inculcation of national values – boring, traditional, and one-sided. The new primary source investigation and historical consciousness approach fits Miller and Seller’s definition of the *transaction* orientation to curriculum: a response to the static, top-down transmission approach, with an emphasis on interaction and problem solving in an effort to court pragmatic and rational thinking. However, this work is so typical of the transaction orientation that it prohibits any connection, and thus responsibility, between each other and the world.

The transaction orientation to curriculum is based on Dewey’s approach to education in which students (re)construct knowledge through dialogue and investigation using the scientific method; which he claimed was “the only authentic means at our command for getting at the significance of our everyday experiences of the world in which we live” (quoted in Miller & Seller, 1990, p. 64). Miller and Seller expanded the definition of the transaction approach by identifying three frameworks that refine how this orientation can be taken up: the disciplines approach, the cognitive processes approach, and the democratic citizenship approach (1990, pp. 93-110). Although discussed separately, the primary source investigation approach to history education connects all three frameworks using the concept of ‘historical consciousness’ as an overarching theme. In this approach, history education is thought of as the relationship between the discipline of history, students’ cognitive understanding of history, and the relationship between history and citizenship. In the interest of brevity, I

will refer to the body of work as the 'disciplinary cognitive citizenship' approach or DCC for the remainder of this paper.

Historical consciousness can be defined as the collective consciousness of the national story as well as an understanding of how a national story gets put together (Seixas, 2004a, 2006). The idea of "historical consciousness" originated in Europe and has been used by theorists with a broader scope than history curriculum (Ahonen, 2005; Rüsen, 2004). Seixas expanded on this work and has been the forerunner for integrating historical consciousness as the organizing concept in the DCC approach to history curriculum (1993, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2006), although along with the umbrella concept of *historical thinking*, it has been taken up by other scholars in the field of history education (Barton, 2006; Lévesque, 2001; Sandwell, 2004, 2008; Wineburg, 1999, 2005). According to this approach, history education should focus on teaching students how to construct history like historians, so that they will have the skills to ask questions about the role of history in our present and eventually develop a foundation for building a common historical understanding for the future.

Although the premise of this approach has great possibilities for engaging in dialogue about what our future in Canada could look like, I take issue with how the approach is taken up because "the morally and politically neutral tone of most skills discussion is completely misleading" (Davis, 1995, p. 64). The discipline of history is not a neutral body of conventions that ciphers out or eliminates bias from historical evidence. Like any discipline, history structures how and what we know. Drawing on Foucault, Avner Segall writes that "history does not simply elucidate the world but establish regimes of knowledge and truth that regulate (discipline) our relation to (and in) it" (2006, p. 130).

The ability to analyze, problem solve, and make quick decisions are valued skills for workers in today's economy in which businesses have to stay one step ahead to keep up (Ejiogu, Yang, Trent, & Rose, 2006).

However, the focus on these skills implicitly take the world we know as a given and leaves no room to explore who you could be outside hegemonic structures of being (Walcott, 2009; Wilson, 2009). In other words, “with skills, workers know how to do their jobs. Without knowledge, they have no basis for questioning anything” (Osborne, 2006, p. 123). Thus, when we emphasize the skills of history over the content and challenges of history, “we are not just getting precise, practical particulars: we are getting a highly committed approach to restructuring capitalism” (Davis, 1995, p. 64).

Right now the global economy is feeling the effects of rampant capitalism and consumption. Our neoliberal ethic of individual rights and free trade has created an invitation for unbridled consumption without a thought toward responsibility and self-restraint. This has led to isolation and displacement amongst people rather than collectively and solidarity across groups. Individuals have become ahistorical, alienated units who are democratically “empowered” by having the (limited) choice between candidate A and candidate B or plasma set A or high-definition set B (Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008, pp. 496-497). A neoliberal democracy has been a careful bait and switch for “real” or “thick” democracy in which people feel they have a vested interest in the politics and policies of their state (Sears & Hughes, 1996). Television commercials, lifestyle programming, and reality television have created “a strong measure of loyalty to capitalism and democracy” which has effectively removed the need for history and civics classes as “indirect loyalty techniques” to the state (Couldry, 2008; Davis, 1995, p. 14). This has led to a widespread fear that young people are less engaged and knowledgeable about civic democracy than in times past (Chalifoux & Stewart, 2009; Ignorance Exploited,” 2008; Perkel, 2008; Urquhart, 2006).

Stéphane Lévesque found that the key concepts of Canadian citizenship include personal rights, cultural pluralism, and political participation (2003, p. 109). These values align with Sears and Hughes’

conception of liberal democratic citizenship, which they define as a national ethic that respects the value of individual and property rights and the importance of civic participation used in an effort to rationally reform society (2004, pp. 127-128). To clarify, due to the assumed obligation of the state to ensure a person's rights, there is a certain apathy between rights discourse and neoliberalism (Faulks, 1998, p. 67). With that being said, the individual focus of the rights discourse in the state supports the neoliberal agenda of privatization and competition, thus paradoxically making rights-based citizenship an important component to the neoliberal project. Therefore, although these values are not necessarily negative, teaching toward liberal democratic values without room for individual exploration and collective solidarity has the possibility of decreasing political participation rather than increasing it.

To understand if students were really as apathetic and apolitical as widely believed, researchers have recently attempted to understand how students understand citizenship and related concepts of patriotism and nationalism (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008; Lévesque, 2003; McKenzie, 2006). These researchers found that students did not think of the "elitist and narrow" version of knowledge, skills, values, and participation that are popularly understood as being part of Canadian citizenship (Sears, 2004, p. 96). Instead, students have internalized the individual ethos of liberal democracy and rights to the extent that they see themselves as separate and isolated from political governance and action, thus affirming the values of a neoliberal democracy.

In comparing the conception of citizenship between students from Québec and students from British Columbia, Lévesque found that the increased focus on citizenship education over the last twenty years has helped develop a "rights-based consciousness" amongst students in both provinces (2003, p. 110). However, as discussions with low-income youth in the inner-city of Vancouver have illustrated, people are only worthy of their rights if they use self-surveillance to monitor and police

their actions (Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008, p. 500). In their study, Kennelly and Dillabough found that youth repeatedly drew “upon the idea that a person’s fate is exclusively the result of their own individual choices” in describing what it takes to be a good citizen (2008, pp. 502-503). In other words, these students did not conceive of the state as responsible for social problems since the state guaranteed all the necessary rights and freedoms one would need to live a good life. Rather, these students understood that problems were the failure of the high-risk and undeserving individual for taking care of him or herself in a fair and just country like Canada.

Researchers found that this ethos gets translated to global and environmental issues as well. High students from the Greater Toronto Area demonstrated an understanding of global and environmental problems but with a sense of “inactive caring” or a sense of not being able to make any substantial change in the world (McKenzie, 2006, p. 208). These students recognized global social and economic issues, but did not connect them to dominant narratives of neutrality, individual power, and economic achievement that supported their understanding of individuality versus collective responsibility (McKenzie, 2006, p. 213). Thea Renda Abu El-Haj also found that students who saw themselves as transnational or diasporic subjects, such as Palestinian American youth, conceived of their North American citizenship “positively in terms of legal and political rights and economic access,” however their personal alliances were to their Palestinian homeland and not to the nation-state in which they were entitled to exercise these rights (2007).

These studies demonstrate that students do understand rights-based liberalism for articulating their relationship to the nation, but this conception of citizenship is where their apathy comes from. Thus, a civic “crisis” is not in the lack of cognitive understanding of citizenship, but quite the opposite: the understanding of citizenship to mean self-surveillance, individual rights as economic investment, and protection

without action. Thus, students do understand their individual rights as important and something the state guarantees, but at the same time they also understand that these rights ensure that they do not have to have an allegiance or responsibility beyond that guarantee. I argue that the DCC approach to history is an example of supporting this neoliberal ethic in curriculum, and thus reinforces the very apathy it tries to curtail.

The relationship between citizenship and history education is traditionally very strong; in fact, in certain contexts they are synonymous. Many of the DCC proponents advocate the DCC model as a way to build a new type of citizenry in our modern, transnational, and multicultural world. Peter Sexias argues that instead of forcing a common narrative in our “multinational, multicultural, and globalizing society” (2006, pp. 20-21), history curriculum should emphasize the questions we all ask about where we came from, where we are going, what we should believe, and if things are any better (2006, p. 15). Keith Barton writes that by giving students the opportunity to reach conclusions by examining a variety of viewpoints found in historical evidence, history education can create the conditions for responding to and accepting difference in society; although he admits that this is never a given (2006). These tools of critical inquiry will bring discipline to memories and folklore, which, according to Canadian historian Desmond Morton, would lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of historical experiences and a more “mature” citizenry (2000).

DCC proponents rightly argue that historians have developed a framework for rationally constructing accounts of the past (Bain, 2000; Sandwell, 2005; Wineburg, 1991) and just as students learn how to conduct experiments in science class, students in history class should learn how to work with evidence and construct historical accounts like professional historians. This argument is a direct connection to Dewey’s approach in that students should approach an issue/problem/topic

using a categorical and rational method, producing a rational response and a set of skills that can translate into real world situations.

However, it is here where I see the DCC approach taking an active turn away from the intersection of politics and history that I think is an essential aspect of learning about the past and toward embracing a neoliberal ethic of separation and rationality that prohibits history from being used as a tool of possibility and transformation for the future. With the Canadian government declaring Canada a multicultural nation in 1971 and with continued immigration in urban and suburban centres, exploring ways to negotiate Canada's plurality is not new. In fact, many young people in Canada recognize diversity as something that defines us (Lévesque, 2003, p. 114). But in defining "us" we also define "them," and it is here we have to pay attention to the connection between the neoliberal conception of the individual and the value of plurality in our nation.

In the DCC approach, the focus moves *off* names and dates, the content or the *substantive* concepts of history, and is instead placed on the *skills* used to create balanced, rational, and methodologically ordered historical accounts, or the *metahistorical* concepts of history (Ashby, et al., 1997; Lee & Ashby, 2000). According to this approach, it is "impractical to seriously engage in the study of the past" without emphasizing these "second-order" concepts (Lévesque, 2005). However, this shift in focus ensures that we avoid directly talking about the power that is imbedded in who and what are important for and in the nation, and instead focuses on the methodology that legitimates this importance. The discipline of history "regulates what kind of questions can and should be asked within historical inquiry" and these questions "are never neutral, never disinterested and consequently neither are the judgements derived by them" (Segall, 2006, p. 134 & 138). Thus, although many DCC proponents argue that this approach to history is both logical and integral for today's multicultural Canada because history moves away

from memorizing potentially polarizing content and toward a “scaffolding” for framing how history can be rationally understood, this approach fails to take into account how history, the past, and our encounters with both, are not always rational, logical, nor should be treated as such.

In both 2002 and 2006 Peter Seixas, the forerunner of the DCC approach in Canada, highlighted the importance of this approach by using the following quote from John A. MacDonald from 1885:

The Chinese are foreigners. If they come to this country, after three years' residence, they may, if they choose, be naturalized. But still we know that when the Chinaman comes here he intends to return to his own country; he does not bring his family with him; he is a stranger, a sojourner in a strange land, for his own purposes for a while; he has no common interest with us, and while he gives us his labor [sic] and is paid for it, and is valuable, the same as a threshing machine or any other agricultural implement which we may borrow from the United States on hire and return it to the owner on the south side of the line; a Chinaman gives us his labor and gets his money, but that money does not fructify in Canada; he does not invest it here, but takes it with him and returns to China; and if he cannot, his executors or his friends send his body back to the flowery land. But he has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations, and therefore ought not to have a vote. (Seixas, 2002, 2006)

Seixas says that the “richness of this document as a text for historical study is made clear by the questions of historical consciousness”: questions such as “in what ways has there been change between 1885

and now? Does the change represent progress in racial attitudes? How should we judge Macdonald?" (2002). According to Seixas, when students engage with this passage a good response should include evidence of making a reasoned judgement about the interpretative choices in writing history; the *pastness* of the past, but also the legacy of the past; and finally, an acknowledgment of the "complexity and uncertainty" of the perspectives and belief systems of people from the past (2006, p. 16).

In other words, when students read this passage it is important for them to identify three things: one, we might not be familiar with MacDonald's blatant racism because someone made an *interpretive choice*, and thus a choice that is assumed to be objective and rational based on the criteria of the discipline (Segall, 2006), to omit a passage like this from our history books; two, that this opinion from the past is articulated by an individual who had a different belief system than ours because they lived in a different time; and three, although the past is still important for the future, we have to understand these actions and beliefs, especially distasteful actions and beliefs, by this distance. Therefore, the racism of this quote, the racism of excluding these stories from history, and the continued racism of exploiting racialized labourers in Canada, topics which can be highlighted and explored using this quote, takes a backseat to the rational discussion that *some* people make choices and make statements and support decisions that we can now, now that we have progressed, can see as distasteful.

Seixas says that this approach "provides a rational way, on the basis of evidence and argument, to discuss the differing accounts that jostle with or contradict each other" (2002). However, with this approach we force logic, order, and meaning on an account that could unsettle many people's understanding of Canada as an open, tolerant, and multicultural nation. Instead, rather than moving directly to rationality, we could "reconsider uncertainty" (Farley, 2009, p. 551) and use this

quote as a “genuine transgressor,” in which the “words refuse to be reduced to the terms of our prevailing categories” and which are “necessary for the invention of new forms of social life” (Simon, 2004, p. 199).

When this account is reduced to a rational and categorical discussion of the historicity of the text and is foremost looked at as a piece of textual evidence from the past, history curriculum apprentices students in a type of “studied amnesia” (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 18) in which they do not have to take seriously Canada’s colonial legacy before, after, and during its multicultural legacy. Although Seixas is interested in using this quote to challenge our rote knowledge about the Canadian nation, the focus on metahistorical, ‘second-order’ concepts means that there is a push for progression in dealing with accounts of the past (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Seixas, 2006), which is intended to move students away from a colloquial and possibility emotional encounter with the past, and toward a rational, mature understanding of evidentiary selection and disciplinary interpretation (Morton, 2000). However, the categories of progression are, once again, not neutral or objective standards. They are categories that structure how and what we know and by what means. History then becomes a form of “productive knowledge” or knowledge that can be “measured and quantified,” rather than “emancipatory knowledge” that “helps us understand how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege” (McLaren, 2003, p. 73).

When I read this account, I see it as an opportunity to invite students to begin to dismantle the taken-for-granted operations of power and privilege in the neoliberal nation-state of Canada. I see it as an opportunity for students to deconstruct why the “perspectives and beliefs” of people like John A. MacDonald was and continuously is, privileged over the “perspectives and beliefs” of exploited, racialized labourers in Canada and abroad. I read this account as an invitation to discuss the ramifications of racist and sexist policies that were, and are,

central to the building of the Canadian nation-state. Finally, I see this account as a way for students to engage the realities we live in and to recognize that they are historically-based and ever present in the public space of the classroom.

Left on its own, the DCC approach to history is inadequate. It leaves no place to discuss inequities in the past or present by leaving no place to think about history outside of classification and rational thinking. By focusing on rationality and skills, rather than identity and collaboration, history curriculum becomes a vehicle for self-surveillance and inactive caring. It does not acknowledge that “within the same classroom, the relationship of students to the same history curriculum can be vastly different” (Stanley, 2002, p. 12).

Furthermore, only recently have non-traditional sources such as memory, beliefs, experience, spiritualities, or connections to the land (Bobb-Smith, 2007; Delgado, 1989; McCue, 1997; Smith, 2008; Wertsch, 2000) have been recognized as valid for constructing historical accounts. As educators working with Critical Race Theory have emphasized, hearing these ‘alternative’ accounts in our study of the past are key for challenging a hegemonic vision of the past, present, and future (Delgado, 1989; Dion, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tyson, 2003). Thus, by using the discipline of history as the main structure for entering into the study of the past, the DCC approach runs the risk of reproducing the privilege of the Western philosophical tradition for making rules about who and what counts in the study of the past. Although in the DCC approach students are thinking about how history “is done” by looking at evidence and interpretation, they are not being asked to recognize “how that ‘doing’ is orchestrated and orchestrates others to make meaning with/in/through it and what versions and visions of the world – past, present, and future, are promoted by it” (Segall, 2006, p. 138).

Emphasizing the “pastness of the past” negates a discussion about the legacy of racism in nation building and the long-term effects it has on

students inside and outside the classroom. MacDonald was making this statement to influence the discussion about the enfranchisement of Chinese workers in Parliament, which directly influenced how these labourers would be treated and understood within Canada. A discussion about the “different perspectives and beliefs” of historical actors does not address the fact that John A. MacDonald’s perspectives and beliefs informed and became policies, nor that the “perspectives and beliefs” of the Chinese workers have been structured as being outside the space of Canada (Stanley, 2006). In other words, despite the DCC premise that “[the discipline of] history is more important than any particular story it tells” (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 200), “stories matter, and how we tell them matters more” (Smits, 2008, p. 107, drawing on Thomas King).

If we emphasize disciplinary skills that can rationalize beliefs, perspectives, and policies that students may encounter as surprising or even offensive in their study of the Canadian past, then we can never tell or affirm the story of how Canada is structured by an imperial legacy of racism that informs people’s lives within Canada today and “[‘translate’] cultures and histories in a way that make it possible to reassess and revise the stories with which one is most familiar” (Simon, 2004, p. 190, drawing on Homi Bhabha). It is important to tell the stories that elicit uncertainty in history curriculum because left on its own, the common stories that narrate the Canadian nation is not prepared to recognize the realities of racism that has structured the country (Stanley, 2006). According to Simon, being open to the rational and irrational questions that the uncertainty in encountering difficult history provokes “is too important to the prospect of hope, to the possibilities of human futurity, to simply abandon within the hegemonic prerequisites of a neo-liberal logic” (2004, p. 190).

The MacDonald quote that Seixas uses to explain the DCC approach could be used to teach students about the legacy of using and

dehumanizing racialized workers for the benefit of the nation, and can chip away at the false notion that the Fathers of Confederation built Canada with the current multicultural incarnation in mind. Thus, the emphasis on using primary sources and thinking about the construction of historical narrative in history education is not misguided, but the emphasis on rationality and skills over all else is. For example, history educator Robert Scappini has found that when disengaged students take up primary document investigation in their history class, especially documents that focused on their communities or families, they gained a greater sense of ownership and pride in history (2004). Thus, the knowledge that a student could gain from this quote, about themselves, about John A. MacDonald, about labour and immigration, and about who and what is Canadian, succumbs to what Ken Osborne calls the “weakness” of the DCC approach in which knowledge is “variously [ignored], [taken] for granted, or [treated] as instrumental to the attainment of historical thinking” (Osborne, 2006, p. 125).

Instead of giving students the tools to think about how people with different backgrounds come to inhabit the same space, the DCC approach is marked by a “need to normalize, to reduce cultural hybridity into its lowest common denominator in order to effect a manageable idea of cultural and national identity” on to them (McKenna, 2003, p. 432). By privileging a set of criteria that is intended to “smooth over” the issues of diversity, students who are marginalized cannot connect to a narrative that sanitizes and shrugs off as “perspective” the racist policies that continue to haunt our existence here; nor can students with privilege recognize that they are implicated in these structural inequities unless we name white, patriarchal, capitalism supremacy for what it is. Disciplinary criteria does not challenge these categories of knowing because like “any other intellectual domain, [history] disciplines knowledge, knowers and ways of knowing, using specific theoretical and methodological frameworks” (Segall, 2006, p. 134) that reinforces the

world we already know. Instead of saying that we will become bonded as citizens because we now have disciplinary skills to bring our struggle for belonging together, we need to “shift our conceptual frameworks for citizenship education in ways that engage questions of identity and inequality, and that educate youth for social change” (Abu El-Haj, 2007).

Historical knowledge can be emotional and should teach you about yourself and others around you. It should provoke questions, but questions that challenge our understanding of the world, rather than questions that are “rhetorical statements based on the premise that we really are able to understand what we are being told, that indeed we have heard of similar things happening before, and that we can understand (and judge) testimony on these terms” (Simon, 2004, p. 196). In other words, “when we emphasize the promise of reason and progress through education, what is forgotten is its underside: the conflicts, passions, anxieties and uncertainties that fuel questions in the first place” (Farley, 2009, p. 550). Emotional or unpredictable queries provoked through an introduction to the Other through history does not mean we have to shy away from aspects that may be uncomfortable, but rather it means that we have to think about how to explore these hidden dimensions of our collective stories safely, ethically, and collaboratively within history classrooms.

DCC advocates like Seixas are right that modern Canada does have an abundance of identities and perspectives (2000, 2002), but conflict and difference within the nation “does not represent a problem, but rather an opportunity for genuine productive study, discussion, and learning” (Trofanenko, 2008, p. 197). Researchers have shown that self-surveillance and inactive caring are part of how students understand themselves and others in the nation, which results in polarization being the only way youth can imagine public participation and legitimacy (Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008; McKenzie, 2006). Rather than teach students how to separate and rationally analyze historical information,

leading to further separation and isolation, students need to learn content that they can use to collaboratively deconstruct the past and explore other possibilities for the future.

The present DCC approach to Canadian history curriculum does not do the work it claims to be doing. Under the guise of provocative curriculum, it seeks to placate students in a neoliberal understanding of self rather than prepare them for the diversity of 21st century Canada. Canadian history curriculum needs to take seriously the homogenizing ethic of today's neoliberal politics by acknowledging the power and privilege imbedded within historical narratives. By structuring history education so that there is no place to think of the Canadian historical narrative outside a rational and depolitical framework, the DCC approach does a continued injustice to the future of the Canadian nation-state. A history curriculum that takes seriously our colonial and colonizing history, will be a true Canadian approach to history curriculum and will open up space for what history should do: transform.

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