Young People’s Assimilation of a Collective Historical Memory: A Case Study of Quebeckers of French-Canadian Heritage

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When young, fifteen- to twenty-five-year-old Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage attending secondary school, college, or university are asked, without prior warning, to tell the history of Quebec since its beginnings, this is, broadly, what they all write:

- In the beginning, there were people who had come from France. They lived a fairly rudimentary, but peaceful, life, in a world they were building together in French. They suffered under the twin annoyances of a colonial regime and a mercantile system, but felt no need to rebel against the mother country. They traded with the indigenous people, and gradually became aware of the considerable economic potential of the patch of America they inhabited. They suffered few internal conflicts, continued to be dominated by French interests, but did not have to fight to preserve their rights or their tongue.

- Then came the Great Upheaval, touched off by the 1759 Conquest of New France by the British. Thus began the francophones’ history of unending struggle to emancipate and liberate themselves from continual attempts at assimilation, whether warlike or underhanded, inflicted on them by the anglophones. From the Quebec Act (1774) to the Quiet Revolution (1960), the dynamics of conflict frames all the milestones of Quebec history, with one side seeking to assert itself and the other ruling with a carrot or a stick.

- The 1960s brought the newly invigorated Quebeckers’ collective Great Awakening. They plunged steadfastly into modern life and put

a healthy distance between themselves and their former perceived identity and ways of being, readily summed up under a triple caption: agriculturalism, messianism, and anti-democratism. They opened their doors to the world, shook off the English yoke, freed themselves from a federal government that had been a preferred instrument of control ever since the war, and set about taking back their collective destiny. Jean Lesage, and particularly René Lévesque, are seen as key players in this shift, facilitating collective action and redeeming the group's shared history.¹

For various reasons, particularly because the people of Quebec are divided over their future and because there are forces, particularly the federal government, that are frustrating its advent, this future burgeoned during the Quiet Revolution (the liberation of the people of Quebec and the sovereignty of Quebec) only to be stymied by the 1980 and 1995 referendums.² Then came a period of uncertainty, the search for a gateway into the future, and maybe even a stab, albeit ambiguous, at redefining Quebeckers' self-identity.

This is the dominant storyline that young Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage tell of the historical experience of the Quebec community. The amazing thing about this story is how nostalgic and melancholic these young people's memory of the historic course of Quebec and its people is. Their representation of the past seems to be built around three narrative clusters: 'what unfortunately befell a community,' 'what that community might have become if only ...,' 'what that community might yet become if only ...,' all of which point to an unhappy representation of Quebec's place in history.

However, it is hard to understand, or even justify, this representation, in light of advances in historical research over the last twenty-five years—which have managed to afford a much more positive, exciting representation of Quebec's place in history.³ An enviable overall situation. When the inevitable, relevant question, in this case: why does this historical memory persist in young people when conditions have been in place for some time for it to fade away?

Programs and Textbooks

The first hypothesis that leaps to mind, when trying to grasp the origins of this particular memory of the Quebec historical experience, lies in the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec's (MEQ) history programs, as well as in the textbooks approved by the Ministry and used in the classroom.⁴ Could young people's memory, embodied here in a forceful narrative about the history of Quebec and its people, possibly just be a pared-down version, retelling or reproducing the implicit tendencies and explicit content of those programs and textbooks?⁵

In spite of what one might be led to believe, it is not easy to do a clear-cut assessment of where those programs tend or what those textbooks contain.

A quick overview of the current secondary history program, on the one hand, and the college Social Studies program, on the other, shows a series of perfectly reasonable objectives, focuses, learning paths, and content, with regard to advances in contemporary historical research methods and disciplinary practices, to the intellectual maturity of young people at this particular stage in their lives, and to the purposes served by a history focusing on the Quebec historical experience.⁶ Let us assume, as members of the task force on the teaching of history⁷ have done, that these programs—particularly the secondary program—should be revised to give more weight to the role played in Quebec's historical experience by indigenous peoples and ethnic communities. It would be overdoing things, however, to start again from scratch to satisfy certain critics who claim these programs are 'chock full of nationalism.'⁸ In fact, everything leads us to believe that, were existing programs followed to the letter or covered in all their complexities and openness, they would foster the acquisition of a nuanced, polyvalent representation of the historical experience of Quebec.

This said, let us not forget, while maintaining a hypercritical, 'suspicious' stance concerning the Quebec Ministry of Education's (MEQ) educational endeavours, that the secondary level IV program includes among its final outcome objectives 'explaining the Conquest, its causes and its immediate effects,' 'describing the events of 1837-1838 and the early days of the union of the two Canadas,' 'analysing the clash between traditionalism and changes in Quebec society during the Duplessis era,' and 'characterizing the Quiet Revolution and its consequences.'⁹ It is perfectly legitimate to believe that this program may have influenced the structure of the story told by the young people, as it is backed up by a greater or lesser extent by particular foregrounded components of the program (the Conquest, the Rebellions, the Quiet Revolution). In this case, it would not be outrageous to postulate a transfer relationship between the learning objectives of the MEQ's programs and 'the history of
Quebec as told by young people. This said – and this point should be stressed – neither the secondary IV history program nor the college level Social Studies program explicitly, readily, or easily nurtures the representation that young people have of Quebec's past or the story they tell in synthesizing it.

Our assessment of the textbooks closely approximates the one we have just made of the programs. It would be a mistake to assert that textbooks approved by the MEQ, at least for the secondary level IV history program, narrate Quebec's historical experience by focusing closely on a sectarian or unitary concept of things. A study of the content of textbooks available on the Quebec market during the mid-1990s does show that their storyline is not narrowly nationalistic, even though the issue of nationalism is at the heart of the narrative told to young Quebeckers. The narrative in these textbooks does not present francophones as either the unfortunate victims of the British or the dupes of Canadian endeavour. Nor are francophones depicted as bearing a cross. The textbooks are patriotic not only towards Quebec, but also towards Canada – or at least they were until recently. In fact, according to the authors of these textbooks, the historical experience of Quebec must be seen and appreciated from the perspective of the various, persistently present, levels of ambivalence surrounding politics and identity. On a socio-economic level, Quebec's situation, particularly for francophones, cannot be boiled down to a single tangible mode of being, that of the dregs of society. In fact, Quebec has always been at the centre of North American and international migrations, social change, and economic processes. This is how its evolution became intimately linked to the dynamics of both the Atlantic system and the North American system.

The foregoing leads to a major observation: there are significant differences between these young people's history of Quebec and the story told in their textbooks. While young people's comments are on the whole pessimistic and melancholy, even anguished and distressed, textbook content is by and large optimistic and hopeful. Similarly, the textbooks' narrative is both many-voiced and ambivalent, while the young people's story is one-sided and unvarying. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the content of the textbooks confirms the whining, nostalgic representation the young people have of the Quebec experience or that it directly nurtures their obvious disappointment in their history. Nonetheless – and this is why we are putting a damper on our statements – we have to concede that textbook content can accommodate this representation and nurture this feeling to the extent that these textbooks contain material for constructing a victimization-based narrative of the people of Quebec, which is pretty much what is on the minds of young French Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage when they tell about their collective past (see appendix, pp. 123–4, for examples).

Hence, the following concern leaps to mind: how can it be, given the relative abundance of notions and stories of Quebec's past found in the MEQ's programs and in readily available history textbooks, that the image that sticks in the minds of these young people is of a 'people that is pushed around, reclusive, always getting back on its feet, but also fearful of seeking fulfillment'? To answer to this question it is necessary to follow a touchy path focusing directly on the heart of the classroom process and on the instructional dynamics established between teachers and their students.

At the Heart of the Classroom

While it is true that the classroom is only one among many places for acquiring historical knowledge, it is nonetheless an intensive, organized learning place, as evidenced by the vast store of knowledge that secondary school students acquire about New France and Canada-Quebec in general. Now, teachers are at the centre of the overall student learning process. Teachers can either establish themselves a priori or gradually as the primary classroom source of credible information. There is research showing that students have a natural tendency to consider their teachers to be intellectually honest and responsible people. Even when, in certain cases, students do not approve of particular teachers' personalities or teaching abilities, their sense that those teachers are sincere, straightforward, and open in their teaching is in no way diminished.

Considering the status and role that teachers enjoy in the overall learning process, it is obvious that their influence can be a determining factor in the representation that students develop of historical experiences, such as Quebec's. In fact, teachers have full run of their classes: their presentations always win out over textbook content; they are the ones bringing a program's objectives and content into focus; they also guide and prepare their students, according to the particular knowledge they consider essential to testing, satisfying the objectives they have set, or meeting certain educational requirements specific to the institutions where they work. Above and beyond any other source of information – with the possible exception of an unusually credible family member –
teachers, while not their students’ only source of information, are or do become their most authoritative reference.

This, it would appear, is where things get sticky. Some studies, making use of polite, restrained formulas, have indeed shown that history teaching at the secondary level – in an environment where particular basic historical concepts, interpretations, or narratives, including the history of Canada-Quebec, are formed and consolidated – is often deficient, due to the staff’s limited competence in the area of factual knowledge and historiographic debate. Several observers have found that the problem was so serious and widespread that it needed to be rectified promptly. What was at issue here was not so much teachers’ ability to ‘manage their classrooms,’ arouse their students’ interest, or use appropriate teaching strategies, as it was their capacity to provide young people with nuanced concepts, representations, and interpretations based on adequate, up-to-date knowledge of the subject matter being taught.

Indeed, a great many teachers, in spite of their immense enthusiasm and excellent teaching skills, may still impart outdated or obsolete notions and interpretations about the past to their students. Although they teach from a store of incontrovertible raw data, particularly from textbooks, they may form their notions and interpretations by combining that set of data on the past with an overview based on earlier research or on a paradigm that is not always as systematic as it might be.

In practice, a particular teacher’s issues or referential paradigm can quite easily overdetermine the storyline presented or told to young people. Teachers juxtapose their own history against history proper all the more readily when, lacking adequate factual knowledge, interpretive skills, or intellectual courage to support an unconventional or eccentric version of Quebec’s historical experience, they tend to use, implicitly or explicitly, a socially accepted and legitimized storyline, making it safe and reassuring to display their knowledge and incorporate information gleaned elsewhere into their views.

Although this practice is problematic, it would be a mistake to condemn it out of hand. It should instead be seen as a normal, logical approach for people without all the desirable skills in an area of knowledge, working in a system with pressure from above (the administration) and below (the students) and seeking to compensate for their deficiencies, to forestall any future teaching failures, and to help everyone, including a system that spurns deviations and failures, feel safe.

In the context of a compensatory solution, the use of a conventional historic register and narrative scheme (for example, the story of ‘Quebec’s history register and narrative scheme (for example, the story of ‘Quebec’s edge, working in a system with pressure from above (the administration) and below (the students) and seeking to compensate for their deficiencies, to forestall any future teaching failures, and to help everyone, including a system that spurns deviations and failures, feel safe."

tragedy’) is probably the most immediate, efficient defence mechanism available to a teacher. That a storyline with so much overall structural coherence and power imposes itself in the public arena is proof of its credibility for many teachers, or is at least a fundamental basis for confidently asserting historic truth. This situation also provides a supportive base for transmitting content to which students may be more receptive. As is well known, any message, even a scholarly one, is easier to accept if it reinforces or confirms previously held notions. It is of course perfectly reasonable to believe that the conventional binaries, French/English, Quebec/Canada, and nationalism/federalism, while more or less mastered by incoming secondary (level IV) students, lay safe, credible foundations on which to erect a coherent, cohesive, plausible, engaging, linear, progressive, predictable, and desirable, history of Quebec’s experience. These discursive conventions, which may give rise to a teacher-student community of thought, are indeed widespread in Quebec. They are the custodians of a sanctioned concept of Quebec’s history, and constitute significant parameters of the public doxa. These narrative schemes continue to be played out with antagonistic characters in cut-and-dried, more or less fictional or realistic tableaux, on television and film. They even serve as the interpretive infrastructure of some of the most popular syntheses of Quebec history. For a great many teachers, using them as the basic storyline recounting Quebec’s historical experience then becomes a way to keep young audiences in familiar territory. One has to be relatively well equipped – that is, factually and interpretively competent and intellectually undaunted – to deviate from an established narrative scheme, or even to criticize it. Even if certain teachers were uncomfortable with the existing narrative scheme – which, one might suppose, is not likely to be the case for most school history staff – it would be very risky to take an iconoclastic approach. There are three main reasons for this:

- Such teachers might indeed put their students at risk of not doing well on the Ministry’s standardized exam.
- Without as strong a conceptual framework as the one being challenged, those teachers could be depriving their students of the chance to make sense out of the components provided, leaving them to flounder in an interpretive morass, frustrated and incapable of combining those elements into a satisfying whole or wishing to investigate further.
- As iconoclasts, teachers could finally lead their students – who might
be willing to accompany them in their narrative explorations because they would trust their intellectual prowess – across the divide to stunted memory, to the ‘unthinkable’ history of Quebec, and the wastelands of collective experience, all places where they must tread with extreme caution, lest they become marooned or lost.

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that history teachers would rather stick to a socially sanctioned narrative scheme of Quebec’s historical experience. This would definitely be the case at the secondary level, and largely so, it appears, at the college level. At university, the constraints of a narrative scheme no longer come into play. It is accepted that university-level instruction, nurtured by the faculty’s basic research, pushes back the frontiers of knowledge and favours criticism of existing interpretations. It is safe to assume that this is an important process within the institution, but not necessarily the predominant one. This said, students attending universities do not arrive as virgin territory, or devoid of historical knowledge and interpretations about the past. Rather, they acquire or develop their new concepts based on the original, basic ones that they held before even taking their first secondary-level (IV) history course on Canada-Quebec. Our research leads us to believe that the representation of Quebec history held and assimilated by entering university students fits well within the conventional narrative scheme of Quebec’s historical experience.20

How do their views change over the course of three years of university study? To answer this objectively, we need to compare their B.A. entering and exit answer sheets. However, a series of courses, each reinforcing the previous one’s interpretive content, would appear to be necessary to accomplish the task of deconstructing this basic representation of Quebec history in order to shake the pillars of an already assimilated narrative scheme. There are at least two reasons why universities, unfortunately, afford very few such opportunities. First, since the faculty has full control over the content of their courses, what they teach is by and large up to them. Furthermore, no research group in Quebec is currently trying to gain a following for an alternative narrative scheme: in practice, there is only a slim chance that students might gain access to a different narrative register. The situation may be even more formidable for students enrolled in teacher training programs. These programs deliberately focus on teaching introductory or survey courses rather than specialized ones.21 They give students almost no means to delve into a subject at greater depth. As a result, aspiring teachers are in a weak, rather than a strong position when it comes to acquiring content and interpretations, a situation they themselves deplore.22

The college situation is different. A number of instructors hold master’s or PhD degrees, implying fairly advanced learning. There is reason to believe that many of them are theoretically capable of discarding the conventional narrative scheme when offering the two optional college-level history courses that deal with Canada-Quebec history. Whether or not they actually do depends on considerations linked not necessarily to their levels of competency or knowledge, but rather to personal motives (adherence to a given narrative scheme), to how well prepared they are (level of competency), or to student expectations (implicit demand for a particular narrative).

It is clear that, in light of the preceding discussion, teachers are capable of fundamentally mediating the development of a specific historical memory in their students. This is the first explanation we have for the basis of young people’s particular historical memory. But we cannot stop here in our quest to understand how this memory is formed (and assimilated). We need to take into account another conditioning factor, the social environments of young people’s memory.

Collective Historical Memory

In trying to understand what gives rise to the particular version that young people tell of Quebec’s historical experience, it would be a mistake to focus exclusively on ‘classroom teaching,’ on its constraints and limitations, and on teachers’ limited competencies. In fact, this is a far more complex problem. It relates to Quebec’s strong, publicly held historical memory, which inspires a whole set of references on the part of Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage to their past. This memory is less about grudges than it is about a melancholy, nostalgic awareness centring on the idea, the concept, of a conquered, reclusive people, abused by others and always fearful of reclaiming their destiny.

We have no intention here of describing at great length the contents that form the basis of this historical memory. The task of description, to which we have contributed,23 is already partially done. The fact that Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage have their own historical memory – whether or not individual members of the group hold that memory or stick to it – is not contested by these researchers. The debate has more to do with how to go about updating or modifying this memory as Quebec society marches into the future.24 Since this issue goes beyond
the purpose of this text, we will omit any further discussion here. We simply wish to point out that, in terms of its overall content and focus, 'our' young people's story repeats a great many of the components of the collective historical memory belonging to the group of French Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage. The correspondence is obvious in the children's overall storyline when they narrate the Quebec historical experience. It is confirmed as well by the characters and events they include in their narratives. We wish to stress that we had already discovered the main components of this general narrative of the Quebec experience in other speakers, belonging subjectively to the same group and expressing themselves under other circumstances.

In the case of those belonging to, claiming to belong to, or familiar with the set of references proper to the group of French Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage, there appears to be an expressive relationship and interpretive proximity related to narrating the history of Quebec's past.

This raises the following issue: How do young people learn about, become familiar with, acquire, and master the historical narrative peculiar to Quebec's past — one of the vehicles and driving forces of the collective memory belonging to French Quebeckers of French-Canadian heritage?

At this stage in our work, it is very hard to give a concrete answer to this question. However, the speed and intensity of the process for acquiring this story varies by individual, depending on the conditions and the social learning and educational environments under which their development takes place. It appears to happen in this way:

1. Childhood

Young people spend their childhood, particularly in elementary school and through their family circle, casually learning and absorbing a set of historical facts about Quebec, Canada, and the world. These facts vary in their reliability and truthfulness. Children absorb nascent representations, structured as metaphor (e.g.: the ‘losing’ French and the ‘victorious’ British), of their immediate surroundings and far beyond. These disconnected, piecemeal facts become engraved on their minds more or less forcefully, depending on where and how often they hear or encounter them. They take form gradually, clustering around the original narrative core, which constitutes a basic matrix to which these young minds attach additional facts as they receive and collect them. The contours of a 'space of the acceptable and thinkable' (that which is logically consist-

tent with an initial 'coherent notional structure,' so it can be incorporated into this concept) are soon traced, along with a 'space of the incongruous and unthinkable' (that which is incoherent with respect to this notional structure and which, therefore, cannot be integrated into the concept).

Regarding the story about the Quebec historical experience, with its attendant dominant historical and political statements about Quebec, children quickly come under the sway of such forceful, conventional declaratory terms as Quebec and Canada, French and English, nationalism and federalism, and so forth. These terms are usually assembled within a more or less oppositional discourse that children do not comprehend very well, although they can guess or grasp its importance. They form the solid narrative cores around which the new knowledge that children cannot help but acquire over time orbits. Obviously, little ones will inevitably add complexities to their representation of things as they continue to increase their store of knowledge: they add details here, correct inaccuracies there, and record further notions there. But their original narrative cores, their basic matrix and general notional structure, are not challenged unless their families or teachers forcefully intervene to replace the children's world representation with another representation — equally strong, probably just as simplistic, and most likely structured metaphorically. Failing this kind of massive intervention, or an alternative forceful representation, all new knowledge, even when it is incompatible with the previous concept, will be inexorably sucked into and swallowed by the initial basic matrix, which behaves like a black hole and, thanks to its density and attraction, literally absorbs everything around it. Children's basic matrices expand by adding layers of shading, while remaining generally unmodified in their foundations and structures.

2. Secondary-School Years

This is how things generally proceed until young people take their first World History course (secondary level II), then their Canada-Quebec one (secondary level IV). For the first time in their lives, their representations of history are challenged by norm-referenced, systematically organized knowledge. In theory, students might have their own depictions shaken when thus confronted, since they are usually in an intellectually vulnerable position when faced with other knowledge that is vastly more solid and self-assured than their own. In practice, however, this
happens only rarely. First, the forcefulness of young people's concepts is rooted in metaphoric simplicity. Their narrative cores and basic matrices behave like decoders and encoders of any new knowledge they may encounter, objectively sheltering them, at least at the outset, from any 'alienating' learning. When any new knowledge is catalysed by these cores and matrices, it will simply be rejected, be absorbed by the initial concept, or be rerouted towards it, thus strengthening it. In other words, the only facts that will be accepted or recuperated are those 'recognizable' by students' original, metaphoric, notional structures, including any discursive conventions they may have consciously or unconsciously adopted. In the dynamic interaction between 'former' and 'later' knowledge, the three above-mentioned oppositional binaries that secondary students have more or less mastered when entering secondary level IV will serve as devices for decoding and encoding their newly acquired knowledge. Any transmitted historical material will tend to pass through, or orbit around them. This grants the past a clarity of meaning not necessarily present in 'that which has been.' Such clarity is actively sought by students working to develop a coherent understanding of change in order to insert themselves as historical subjects relative to a prior time (where do I come from?), a present time (where am I?), and a future time (where am I going?). This particular link between later knowledge and the basic notion is all the more plausible since the course of Quebec's past makes it possible to nurture the story revolving around the binaries that students already have or acquire. The fact that this is not the most felicitous story for explaining all the richness and complexity of Quebec's experience is of lesser concern here. When students can reinforce their own established ideas about the past with new ones they encounter, and especially when that material also provides a coherent representation about the history of the world or their home community, they can complete a virtuous circle of learning. In this fashion, the past in their own stories is validated, thereby, in turn, validating that past. What more could they possibly need or seek? In addition to the effect of mutual transfer between the past and its telling, the reinforcement of a socially sanctioned narrative of the Quebec experience, history programs, textbooks, teachers, and classroom processes are all contributing factors. There is a good chance that students at secondary level IV are at a stage in their lives where the narrative about Quebec's past that they assimilate will remain central to their awareness of history, and structurally inhabit their collective identities for a long time to come.

This is not to say, however, that it will condition or determine their political behaviour.

3. College Years

Between the secondary level and college, the previously acquired narrative appears to undergo minimal change, merely widening and complicating its structure and content. Evidently, the original basic cores and matrices around which young people structure their representations are only open to letting new knowledge build up in sedimentary layers on top of the older ones, reinforcing, ipso facto, the narrative's truth system rather than modifying it. At this stage in assimilating a history of the Quebec historical experience, it does, indeed, become difficult to reframe a narrative about the past when it is already firmly seated and structured around assorted raw data, nurtured by a great many social discourses, and inserted within a narrative intertextuality that also includes works by learned historians.

4. University

While it is extremely hard to swim against the stream, young people's original narrative cores, discursive conventions, basic matrices, metaphors, and structures for decoding and encoding will eventually be brought into question at university, as their initial concepts gradually split apart and dissolve, opening the way to new narrative possibilities. Other conditions must be met, however, if any such narrative change or reworking of historical awareness is to take place. First, students must be intellectually inclined towards detaching themselves from their initial story if they are to be receptive to any new material they are provided or discover. Next, students must be open to taking several courses that both cover a variety of historical and historiographic topics and reinforce one another in presenting an alternative concept of the Quebec historical experience. Finally, students must demonstrate the ability to think and use their imaginations actively in structuring a story about Quebec's past that overcomes or removes the conventional boundaries between Quebec's 'thinkable' and 'unthinkable' history. It is obviously difficult in practice to achieve or assemble all these conditions at once. As a result, any chance of overcoming or transforming a historical narrative is very slim, especially since most
university students are not particularly interested in conceptualizing or reworking their studies to take into account the issue of great collective narratives or in gainsaying any historical knowledge that already appears to be established or secure.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the degree of complexity in the process whereby young people acquire a historical memory. While it is obvious that history classes, where teachers play a privileged role as information providers and orchestrators, are the source par excellence for acquiring that memory, it is also obvious that the prevalent, general flow of social discourse, which is both more muffled and perhaps more influential, also contributes to the assimilation of this memory.

This observation has three consequences for the history education of young people:

1. When planning course objectives, teachers — to the extent that they can situate themselves in a different memory and history regime — should accept that young people become repositories, at a relatively young age, of a stock of historical knowledge and a generalized concept of history. This is why teachers, rather than focusing their teaching on transmitting empirical facts, should concentrate on deconstructing specific basic matrices of understanding or on helping young people to grasp the conceptual limitations proper to those matrices. This approach will eventually disrupt the reinforcement dynamic of these matrices and, in the process, counter the perpetuation of a historical memory with many factual discrepancies.

2. Since society as a whole generates memory, teachers should also do as much as they can to help young people evaluate various historical platitudes present in social discourse. They should either have them compare discourses against one other or apply the principles of historical methodology, two precepts of which are the rejection of anachronism and of teleology. This approach helps students hone their critical skills relative to particular social platitudes and particular memory and history discourses.

3. Finally, teachers should provide their students with the factual and interpretive means to construct a story of the past that takes the world's complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes, ambiguities and dissonances into account. They should not, however, leave them prey to a kind of confusion of meaning that might render them intellectually 'impotent' when faced with abusive, ideologically slanted efforts to reconstruct the past.

Appendix

Fragments of Victimization Narratives in Young French Quebeckers of French-Canadian Heritage

[After the Conquest] England attends to its new colony. It institutes its laws and ideas. The Canadians are discontented. Right from the start, the British try to assimilate them. They are still trying to assimilate us now. All those constitutional changes were made for that purpose! Assimilating us, turning us into a minority group and treating us like an inferior race ...

(University student)

After some political shenanigans, France gives up and hands the colony over to the British forces. And they start trying to assimilate us. Present-day Quebec's true face, with all its power relationships and tensions, starts to take shape. The blows are too numerous to list; fixed elections, economic alienation of the Francophones ...

(University student)

The people of Quebec have often resisted being assimilated into Anglophone culture. This gave rise to a separatist movement leading up to several events: The Patriotes, the October crisis, the two Referendums ...

(College student)

From 1608 to 1665, New France is kind of 'shitty,' in the sense of nothing happening in the colony allowing it to make its mark as a major presence on the world map. When Louis XIV (finally) decided to allow New France to develop a local economy, everything was going great in the best of all possible worlds. 1760 unfortunately, the evil-minded British took hold of New France, which, in my opinion, amounts to their taking hold of the truly magnificent future New France would have known under the French government.

(Secondary level V student)
After many a confrontation, the French lost their territory to the British: 

(note that I am writing the French and not the Canadians; we are the ones who suffered the defeat of the French). After that, all the constitutions we were ever given were always designed to assimilate us or keep us quiet.

(University student)

The greatest conflicts began at the time of the British Conquest of 1759. Ever since then, we have been fighting for our survival as a people.

(University student)

The massive influx and settlement of British in Montreal was done to assimilate us. Later on, they (the King of England) decided to separate the two Canadas: Lower Canada and Upper Canada. Lower Canada became Quebec. Because of the false democracy the British instituted, the French Canadians, who became the people of Quebec later on, rebelled and became Patriotes.

(Secondary level V student)

Ever since, the wound left from this defeat (1759) has reopened every time ideological and cultural differences between the French and the British have been felt. Ex.: conscription, the First World War, ... Francophones used as cannon fodder during the Second World War; etc.

(University student)

This business of the Conquest still isn’t settled, because Quebec has definitely shown, in two referendums, that it still feels [wronged] by the ‘invader.’ Later on, the people of Quebec became identified with a distinct society within Canada, which takes us down to the present.

(Secondary level V student)

Notes

This chapter, translated by Yolanda Broad, is a revised version of an article published in Canadian Historical Review 85, no. 2 (2004): 525-56. It is based on data collected from a survey we ran between 1998 and 2001 among 403 young people enrolled in educational institutions in the Quebec City urban area. Of that group, 237 were university students, 62 attended academic and vocational colleges (CEGEP), 51 were enrolled at secondary level V (12th year) and 53 at secondary level IV (11th year). The following task was assigned to these young people, to stimulate their memories and generate history narratives: ‘Present or narrate the history of Quebec since its beginnings, as you perceive it, know about it, or remember it.’ It should be mentioned that the respondents’ identities were neither requested nor desired; that the subjects were given about 45 minutes to elaborate; that the exercise took place in the classroom, with their instructor or teacher present, but not, however, providing the class with any input. It should also be pointed out that the young people were told that the compendium of their work would only be used for academic research, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they should perform the task as carefully and well as they possibly could. To the extent that almost all of our respondents mentioned that their ethnic origins were French Canadian, our analyses are only valid – and this must be stressed – for young French Quebecers of French-Canadian heritage. This is what the subtitle of our article is meant to indicate.

1 Jean Lesage was premier of Quebec from 1960 to 1966. René Lévesque, who played a major part in nationalizing Quebec’s hydroelectric power companies from 1962 on, was, in the latter half of the 1960s, and up until his death in 1987, one of the main figures in Quebec’s sovereigntist movement. He was premier of the province from 1976 to 1985, and presided over the first referendum on the sovereignty of Quebec in 1980.

2 Two provincial referendums on Quebec’s political future were held, in 1980 and 1995. In both cases, the sovereigntist option was defeated, but in 1995, it was only by a 50.6% to 49.4% margin.


4 It should be noted that Quebec’s educational system requires a minimum number of history courses in the school curriculum. During the elementary cycle, in the francophone schools (things are often slightly different in anglophone schools), students are given a very general introduction – and it would appear that most teachers don’t push it very hard – to social studies, with history tossed into the general mix. At the secondary level, students take two required history courses: one survey of history course at secondary level II and one history course on Quebec and Canada at secondary level IV. They may also take an optional contemporary world-history course at secondary level V. In practice, about 3% of young people take that course. During CEGEP (general and vocational college), students may opt for the history program if they wish. Theoretically, there are five history courses available, including two national history courses. Very, very few young people take those courses. At university, enrolment in history courses or
programs depends on students' individual choice of vocational track. In sum, the vast majority of young Quebeckers are satisfied with the training in Canadian-Quebec history they received during their required secondary level IV course. This is scant indeed. A new system was recently approved, requiring a history course during every year of the secondary cycle and at least one required history course at the college level.

In spite of various minor modifications made over the years, the history program introduced in 1982 is still in place today in Quebec's secondary schools.


12. Several experts do not believe that classroom teachers, who prefer using workbooks, are currently using their textbooks either amply or methodically enough. See Robert Martineau, 'Les Cahiers d’exercices ... un cheval de Troie dans la classe d’histoire?' Bulletin de liaison de la Société des professeurs d'histoire du Quebec 23, no. 6 (1985): 20-5.

13. Se souvenir et devenir, chap. 4.


15. Note that it is equally likely that a large number of teachers feel that the 'tragic tale' of the Quebec historical experience is the one that best represents the course of Quebec's history.


17. Films and television series focusing on the history of Quebec are a major genre and enjoy very large audiences.

18. In this respect, the works of Jacques Lacoursière, probably the most widely read Quebec historian in the province, are still the primary source for a great many teachers in the field of history.

19. It is well known that the MEQ's standardized examinations, which are rather traditional, are geared towards controlling the acquisition of basic learning by students, much more than towards helping them develop their critical thinking about historical narrative. See Se souvenir et devenir, 50-1. See also Martineau, L'Histoire à l'école.

20. The basic structure of university student narratives is fairly similar to those of secondary or college students (see appendix to this chapter).

21. The same knowledge gaps are also found in the United States. See Linda S. Levstik, 'Articulating the Silences. Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance,' in Sterns, Seixas, and Wineburg, eds, Knowing, Teaching and Learning History, 284-305.

22. See Laurent Moreau, Patrick Bérubé, Michel Arsenault, and François Turgeon (bachelor in history candidates at Université Laval), 'L'Enseignement de l'histoire au secondaire: Former un corps professoral compétent pour nourrir la pensée critique du futur citoyen,' mémoire présenté au Groupe de travail sur l'enseignement de l'histoire, Quebec City (December 1995).

23. It is not within the scope of the present article to list exhaustively all the work done on this subject. See especially Jacques Mathieu, ed., Étude de la construction de la mémoire collective des Québécois: Approches multidisciplinaires (Quebec City: CELAT, 1986); and Jacques Mathieu and Jacques Lacoursière, Les Mémoires québécoises (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1991). For an overview of our work, see J. Létourneau, 'Digging into Historical Consciousness, Individual and Collective: Overview of a Research Trajectory,' at www.cshc.ubc.ca/pwias/papersphp.

Understanding History

Peter Lee

Understanding History and Understanding the Past

Learning History

History education is often thought of as a relatively straightforward matter: it is learning what happened in the past. Everyone admits to some difficulties, of course. Students of all ages will have to come to grips with more or less specialized concepts belonging to the past activities that historians discuss (for example, in economics, art, diplomacy, or politics). Youngsters will have to face the complexities of an adult world. But the world of history is "recognizably "ordinary," requiring no special concepts of description or explanation other than those commonly appropriate to the subject matter." Learning history is a matter of knowing the story, albeit with a leaven of common sense and worldly experience.

There are several reasons why this view of history education will not do, and two of them are central to this chapter. The first and most obvious reason for saying this is that "learning what happened" is not so easily taken care of. There is not one true story about the past, but a multiplicity of complementary, competing, or clashing stories. (This, of course, raises questions – beyond the scope of this chapter – about how far we can talk of stories being true.) Alternative stories are encountered not just in school or university, but outside in the wider world. Such stories do not come only in written texts purporting to tell us about the past, but in a variety of other ways too. Nor are they confined to the media, although film and television have much to say about the past.