

Moving Towards Stronger Understanding

The *Moving Towards Strong Understanding* project is designed for educators and students to develop enhance the historical learning process to focus more on skill sets and knowledge usage over traditional memorization and repetition. All stakeholders in history education need to have a consistent codified system for understand Seixias and Morton's *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. (2012).

The first phase of the project is a set of rubrics designed to complement *The Big Six* into graded performance standards. Each thinking concept was mapped out into a 4 level rubric for teachers to use for the purpose of formative or summative assessment. The design is intended to allow these concepts to be more accessible to the classroom and easier for teacher to incorporate into their everyday lessons. For assessment teachers would benefit from incorporating tasks that demonstrate the students thought process. Along side these tasks teachers should perpetually work with these concepts over the term and throughout students schooling careers to help students refine their thinking. The primary goal of these rubrics is to give teachers and students resources that can facilitate student learning (2015, 3-4,15). These are designed to demonstrate to students where they are strong in historical thinking and how they can further expand their historical thinking competencies.

The historical thinking concepts can help teachers to focus more on the abilities of students rather than the ability to retain facts, dates, and knowledge. These abilities are seminal to history education but are also transferable to numerous disciplines. The focus of excellent history teaching and learning is not the memorization of facts and figures, but the cultivation of strong and independent thinkers, who endeavour to make sense of the world around them, even as they work on making sense of the past.

These rubrics are designed to be enhancements of practice and classroom assessment theories, which together work to offer a language and a set of goals that can support student success. The scope of the rubrics is broad, and we encourage users to modify these rubrics, to add and subtract from them, to criticize them constructively, and to share their thinking with us.

It may be worthwhile to think of these rubrics as engaging a particular audience, which is contingent on the particular teaching context and the needs or interests of the learners. One factor to consider about this audience is their skill sets. Students have had varying interaction with historical thinking concepts, if any at all. Do not assume that students understand the historical thinking concepts, even though all students will be able to demonstrate some proficiency in each of the levels that the rubrics identify. Students, for varying reasons, may not believe that they are capable of generating their own ideas. They may struggle to connect class content to the final product. It is vital to introduce the language and content of the historical thinking concepts early in the year to empower learners to question, consider, and discuss these with increasing depth or complexity as the school year progresses. In some cases, students may have not engaged with core skills

or habits that underpin the historical thinking concepts, such as interrogating authority, sources, or perspectives.

A second factor to consider is the attention educators must give to communication and language. In the classroom, students have varying reading, writing, and comprehension skills (2013, 1-2). As teachers engage with students it is important that they consider how they are going to communicate and, what is more, how they can listen to and document students' own communications (2013, 4-8). Great educational opportunities can arise when classrooms have students who are multilingual, or whose primary language is not the one spoken in class. They can bring unique perspectives and if they decide to access primary sources in their first language they can integrate new material to enhance the whole learning community. Best practices should be reflective of the school, board, and provincial government policies in terms of assisting ELL learners, and all learners.

The third factor to consider is the student's life outside of the classroom. The historical thinking concepts require second-order thinking that complicates the school life of the learner (2009). Additionally, it is important to think about the historical topics that classrooms confront. History can have students engaging with many sensitive topics that some students may not have dealt with, but nonetheless has a direct impact on their family like those who may be fleeing zones of conflict.

The final factor to consider is the role of trust in a classroom. Students need to feel safe and comfortable in the classroom to share their ideas and thoughts with both the teacher and their peers. Topics in history can be controversial, potentially challenging strong and healthy differences of opinions. Open conversation can benefit and accelerate student development, but if it leads to conflict or feelings of rejection it could be detrimental to the learning experience. Trust is crucial in the process of developing historical thinking and key for teachers to keep in mind.

We want to conclude with a final idea to reflect on. This project is not just about these rubrics, but rather it is part of a much larger debate around assessment and historical thinking (2009, 1-2). As public curriculums are redeveloped, as private schools are created and evolve, and as thousands of new teachers graduate Faculties of Education across Canada we must ask ourselves what is the role of history education in schools? Should the students graduating schools have a set Canadian narrative that they understand or should the emphasis be on a historical consciousness. To be clear these ideas are not mutually exclusive and that is where assessment and historical thinking are critical. Projects and assessments can be constructed so that students are researching material that is relevant to the modern Canadian context.

We thank you for considering the use of these resources and we highly encourage your constructive feedback on the material so we can better adapt it to all classrooms.