

Historical Thinking Mentorship Project

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Section 1. Historical Thinking Concept

Chosen Concept: Historical Perspective

Student explanation for learners:

Historical perspective is about understanding the past by viewing events through the eyes of people who lived at that time. Instead of judging history based on today's beliefs and values, historians ask: What did people back then know? What did they believe? For example, a decision that seems unfair or wrong today might have made sense to people in the past because of their culture, religion, technology, or social rules. By considering these factors, you can better understand why people acted the way they did, rather than simply labelling them as "right" or "wrong."

When looking at sources from the past, historical perspective helps you build stronger, more thoughtful explanations. When you analyze sources, you look for clues about the author's point of view, their background, and the time period they lived in. This helps you avoid presentism, which is the mistake of applying modern values to the past. Instead, you learn to explain events in context.

Section 2. Curricular Alignment

Grade level: Grade 10

Ontario Curriculum Overall Expectation:

C1. Social, Economic, and Political Context: describe some key social, economic, and political events, trends, and developments between 1929 and 1945, and assess their impact on different groups and communities in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities

Teacher facing curricular note:

Historical perspective is a crucial factor in understanding social, economic, and political contexts throughout history; by placing themselves in the minds of the people of the past, students will develop a deeper grasp of the motivations, societal standards, and decisions of historical actors. Historical perspective reasoning additionally helps students avoid casting historical presentism on the events they study; this can forge a stronger relationship with the past and allow them to understand the values that informed their actions, but still allow them to identify the short-term and long-term impacts of these actions on a variety of groups, especially minority communities.

Section 3. Primary Source and Worked Examples

Primary source selection:

The sources selected in this guide are three Canadian propaganda posters from the period of World War II. They cover a variety of topics such as war bonds, contributions to the war effort, and espionage. While we have selected three posters for the sake of this guide, students would have access to the [full database](#) of posters to encourage exploration and inquiry.



Context for learners:

During the period of World War II (1939–1945), the Canadian government released advertisements to garner support for the war effort. These posters were posted in public spaces all around, including train stations, stores, public bulletin boards, and schools, as they were trying to reach as many people as possible. They were designed to encourage Canadian citizens to participate or take action in any way they could; this could include enlisting for the military, buying war bonds to support the war economy, seeking jobs in factories to manufacture munitions and other items, and avoiding potential espionage leaks. The bold images and persuasive language in these posters demonstrate the perspectives, values, and fears of both the Canadian government and the citizens of its country.

Modelled historical thinking:

To analyze these sources using historical perspective, students must be able to think about the feelings, values, and social expectations of those who created the source or who were the target audience. In this way, students will be able to better understand the motivations behind the source, prominent social standards or ways of thinking, and how these ways of thinking may have been drastically different from or similar to the present day. To discover this information, the following guiding questions can be utilized:

1. “Why is it difficult to determine the perspectives of people during this time?”
Using this question with the posters, students can also think about what is missing from the source. What does it *not* tell us? How does this impact the way we understand this source? How does the difficulty of determining perspective make it more important to consider these perspectives?
2. “How can we tell what the creator or the audience was thinking?”
This question allows students to try to analyze details in and around the posters. How does the composition (i.e. colour, subject matter, style, etc.) inform us of their ideas or biases? Are there any context pieces that may help us figure out what they were thinking? (i.e. the war happening around them).
3. “Why might this idea have been popular?”
Students can use this question to consider what social, political, and economic factors may have contributed to these ideas or biases, which can help them develop a stronger understanding of their perspective.
4. “What can this way of thinking explain?”
Using this question, students can explore the ways that historical perspectives may have impacted choices related to the source, related historical events or topics, or social standards of the time.

Teacher note:

For teachers, these propaganda posters can be used especially as an introduction to source analysis to demonstrate these skills without the potentially overwhelming nature of text-heavy documents. Teachers may want to divide students into groups to demonstrate how historians may interpret sources differently depending on their own perspectives, or complete this activity together as a class to model the analysis skills. The teacher may want to emphasize certain imagery, such as women as homemakers and mothers, to demonstrate ideas like gender roles and familial values in the context of WWII. Students may have questions about some of these choices, such as the subjects, the language, or the messaging of the poster; these can be used by the teacher to demonstrate the societal values of the time and explain why or how they may have informed these composition choices. For example, demonstrating mostly or exclusively men in combat or military posters represents the expectations of men during wartime and the mid-century understandings of masculinity. These types of discussions allow students to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives of historical actors; highlighting the values that have changed over time is especially important to ensure that students are not accidentally projecting historical presentism onto their sources.

Section 4. Visual Accompaniment to the Primary Source

Type of visual or organizer: Source Analysis Chart

Questions	Answer & Evidence
What message is the poster trying to communicate?	
What emotion is the poster portraying? Have you ever felt something similar? How?	
This source suggests that people at the time were thinking that...	
Why might this message have been persuasive to people then?	
Final Analysis	
Based on your analysis, what does this poster reveal about the beliefs, values, and perspectives of people at the time it was created?	

Description of the tool:

Students are asked to closely examine World War II propaganda posters using a source analysis chart that guides them to think about historical perspective. As they study the visual details such as images, words, symbols, and colours, they record their observations and consider whose point of view it represents, who will be viewing the poster, and what elements of the poster portray said information. The chart prompts students to move beyond a simple description or observation of the posters and asks them to create a deeper interpretation of their findings. This process supports careful analysis of visual sources, strengthens observation skills, and encourages critical questioning, allowing students to understand how propaganda reflects the beliefs, values, and goals of people during that time period.

Pedagogical purpose:

This visual structure supports historical thinking by deliberately organizing students' thinking into a progression from observation to interpretation, making an otherwise abstract process more concrete and manageable. By separating "what I see" (evidence) from "what I think" (interpretation), the chart slows students down and prevents them from jumping to conclusions or relying on present-day assumptions. The sequence of questions guides students from initial noticing to contextual understanding and finally to evidence-based interpretation of historical perspective, reflecting the scaffolded approach emphasized by scholars like Wineburg and Seixas. In this way, the organizer functions as cognitive support as it externalizes the steps of historical thinking, reduces cognitive overload, and helps students practice constructing interpretations that are grounded in evidence and situated within the historical context.

Section 5. Scholarly Rationale for Pedagogical Design

Scholarly Rationale:

Our learning experience is designed to guide students through a structured process for interpreting historical perspective, while avoiding presentist thinking. Scholars in the field of history education have extensively emphasized the importance of scaffolding the historical thinking process, with some going as far as to argue that "historical thinking" is "an inherently unnatural way of thinking and organizing our thoughts" (Wineburg, 1999). Consequently, it is the educator's responsibility to create scaffolded questions, sentence starters, and prompts to support students in cultivating their own sense of historical thinking (Wineburg, 2016). When it comes to engaging with historical perspective, students' first instinct is often to identify commonalities between their present-day experiences and those experienced by historical actors in an "empathetic leap" (Seixas, 2013). While this can support engagement, students must be guided to avoid presentism (imparting contemporary knowledge and biases on historical actors.) Focusing on "universal human emotions" (e.g., empathy, love, sacrifice, loss) as a focal point in historical perspective enriches student

engagement, but “imposing our present-day knowledge on people of the past” deviates from the historical thinking process. (Seixas, 2013).

To promote evidence-based thinking, Seixas suggests several prompting questions, such as “Why is it difficult to determine the perspectives of people during this time?” and “How can we tell what X was thinking?” (Seixas, 2013). He also provides sentence starters: “This idea might have been popular because” ... “This way of thinking might explain” ... “This source suggests that people at the time were thinking that...” (Seixas, 2013). Accordingly, our learning experience uses a visual organizer and intentional sequencing to scaffold students’ analysis of historical perspectives during World War II. Students first engage in an empathetic connection to the past, then answer questions and use sentence starters to ground their thinking in evidence. By sequencing the task this way, the learning experience ensures students avoid entangling presentist thinking with evidence while building their historical analysis skills.

Our primary sources were chosen to build students’ familiarity with digital history, specifically with navigating online repositories of primary sources. Explicitly teaching students how to use historical databases is essential, as they offer highly accessible and salient opportunities for historical inquiry. Stéphane Lévesque (2006) notes that digital tools allow users to “search, acquire, and even manipulate” sources from repositories located thousands of kilometres away; in today’s highly digital context, building this skill in the history classroom is even more critical. Consequently, digital sources are being used increasingly in classrooms, as they are both multimodal (e.g., print, audio, video, and artifacts) and available for free or at a very low cost (Levesque, 2006). In terms of the process, Levesque argues that engaging with digital history allows students to be “more directly and actively” involved in historical inquiry, as the digital history they are engaging with is often not structured around a specific historical narrative (2006). However, he identifies that if left to their own devices, many students perceive the experience of engaging with digital history as overwhelming, due to an overload of information (Levesque, 2006). For this reason, we selected three posters from an online World War II poster repository, but invited students to view the sources on the database themselves - through this process, they gain familiarity with how to navigate digital history databases, while avoiding overwhelm. By building familiarity with digital learning databases at this stage, our learning experience prepares students to be able to engage in independent historical inquiry later on, positioning them to benefit from digital history resources in the classroom fully.

Citations:

- Levesque, S. (2006). Discovering the Past: Engaging Canadian Students in Digital History. *Canadian Social Studies*, 40(1). <https://doi.org/10.29173/css203>
- Seixas, P., Morton, T., Colyer, J., & Fornazzari, S. (2013). *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. Nelson Education.
- Wineburg, S. (1999). Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts. *Pbi Delta Kappan*, 80(7), 488–499.
- Wineburg, S. (2016, April 1). Why Historical Thinking Is Not about History. *History News (Nashville, Tenn.)*, 71(2), 13–16.