

Historical Thinking Mentorship Project

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Section 1. Historical Thinking Concept

Chosen Concept: Historical Significance

Historical significance is a key concept that helps historians decide which events, people, or developments are important to study and explain. Instead of treating all historical information as equally valuable, historians make judgments about what matters by considering the impact and meaning of different events. Often, something is seen as significant if it led to meaningful change, had lasting consequences, or affected large numbers of people over time. Historians also consider whether an event is revealing, meaning it helps us better understand broader issues or patterns in history and how they connect to the present.

It is important to recognize that historical significance is not fixed. It is shaped through interpretation and can change depending on perspective, context, and time. What one group considers important may differ from another, and events that were once overlooked can become more significant as new perspectives are included. Because of this, historical significance is something that is constructed rather than simply discovered. This concept encourages a more critical and reflective approach to studying history by emphasizing that the past is interpreted, not just recorded.

Student Explanation for Learners:

When historians study the past, they do not treat every event as equally important. Instead, they use the idea of historical significance to decide which events, people, or developments matter most and why. This helps historians focus on what is most meaningful by looking at events that led to important change, affected many people, or still influence life today. Historians also think about whether an event helps us understand bigger ideas about the past or connections to the present.

Historical significance is not something that stays the same forever. What we think is important can change depending on who is telling the story and what they value. Different groups of people may see the same event in different ways based on their experiences. Because of this, history is always being re-examined and understood in new ways. Thinking about historical significance helps students ask deeper questions about the past and consider whose stories are being told and whose might be missing.

Section 2. Curricular Alignment

Grade Level: 10

Ontario Curriculum Overall Expectation:

D1. Social, Economic, and Political Context: describe some key social, economic, and political events, trends, and developments in Canada between 1945 and 1982, and assess their significance for different individuals, groups, and/or communities in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities (FOCUS ON: Historical Significance; Continuity and Change)

Teacher Facing Curricular Note:

Historical significance thinking concept asks students to go beyond memorization and wrote learning; it requires them to ask why certain events deserve to be remembered. Connecting this to the history of residential schools, this means looking into how deliberate government policy and social attitudes towards Indigenous peoples did not just shape Canadian society but fractured it in many ways still felt today. Students are challenged to move beyond the core narratives, centering perspectives that were silenced, and to confront a legacy that has not faded with time. As a result, students build a richer and more honest understanding of the social and political forces that have defined the country since 1914.

Section 3. Primary Source and Worked Example

Primary Source Selection:

<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?idnumber=5095341&app=fonandcol&ecopy=e011267130> Page 2 - Page 10

The primary source we have chosen is the *Citizen Plus* (Red Paper), written by Indigenous leaders in 1970 in response to the White Paper, a proposal by Pierre Trudeau and the Canadian government in 1969. The White Paper suggested removing the special legal status of First Nations peoples, which many Indigenous communities saw as a threat to their rights and treaties, and more broadly, their identity. In response, the Red Paper argues that First Nations peoples should not be treated the same as all other Canadians because their rights are based on historical agreements that must be respected. This document is important because it shows how Indigenous communities spoke out against government policies and fought to protect their rights, culture, and identity.

Context for Learners:

The Citizens Plus (Red Paper) is a document written in 1970 by First Nations leaders in response to a Canadian government proposal called the 1969 White Paper, introduced by Pierre Trudeau. The white paper suggested making big changes to how the government worked with Indigenous peoples, including removing their special legal status, a policy in which allows them have specific rights, access to reserve land, and the protection of treaty agreements made with the Crown. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples fought to keep this because they deserve recognition in their unique agreements. The Red Paper was more than just a document that went against Trudeau and the Canadian government but rather a symbol of resistance to Indigenous reconciliation.

Modelled Historical Thinking:

When historians think about historical significance, it is not just about asking what happened, but why it matters and who it mattered to. Looking at the *Citizens Plus (Red Paper)*, we can analyze that this document is a response to something and someone, not just an opinion. To think about using this primary source can be used with depicting Historical Significance. Questions we can start by asking include:

- What was happening in Canada in 1969-1970 that led to the creation of the Red Paper?
- What issues and concerns are being addressed in this document?
- What perspective is the Red Paper coming from? Why is that important to note?

First Nations groups saw the document they were responding to (The White Paper) as harmful, while the Canadian government at the time saw this as an equitable opportunity. This exemplifies that this one document meant something different to two groups of people. This leads us to ask questions about perspective, which has much impact on the significance of the event. More questions we can ask are:

- Does this document reveal something greater about Indigenous and settler relationships?

- What changes came from this document? Were they immediate?
- Why is the Red Paper still an important document to analyze today?

The Red Paper holds immense significance because it shows a moment when Indigenous peoples unified to defend their rights in the political and social context of being a marginalized group in the face of colonized Canada. Reconciliation was needed and still is as we work to decolonize Canada one step at a time.

Teacher Note:

It is extremely crucial that any educator teaching about the Red Paper addresses this significant historical event not only as a moment in history, but as a very significant document which symbolizes the ongoing struggle of reconciliation in Canada. The Indigenous voices within the Red Paper also indicate empowerment of

Indigenous communities to challenge government decisions, which further gives students critical thinking skills surrounding political powers and flaws within our systems. Students might respond by making connections to present-day issues around Indigenous rights and questioning the fairness behind the Canadian government and the Red Paper. This example supports conceptual learning by encouraging critical thinking skills to go beyond a document and hopefully understand the significance.

Section 4. Visual Accompaniment to the Primary Source

Type of Visual or Organizer: See worksheet below.

Analyzing Historical Significance: - Citizens Plus (The Red Paper) (1970)

Name: _____

Part 1: Photo Analysis:



The photograph features Harold Cardinal, a Cree leader, writer, and political advocate.

1. What do you notice in the image? (List 3-4 details)

2. Based on what you see, what might this moment be about?

3. What question/questions does this image raise for you?

Part 2: Primary Source Analysis and Image Connections

After reading pages 2–10 of the excerpt, answer the following questions using the photograph to support your thinking.

1. How does the Red Paper help you better understand the image?

2. What ideas or messages from the Red Paper connect to what you saw in the image?

Part 3: Primary Source Analysis - Citizens Plus (Red Paper)

Questions	Responses (Use point form)
What change is being discussed or responded to in the Red Paper?	
Who was affected by this change, and why does it matter?	
What does the Red Paper reveal about Indigenous experiences and concerns in Canada?	

How does the Red Paper construct the importance of this issue through its message or perspective?	
Who would see this issue as important, and why?	
Do you think this is still significant today? Why or why not?	

Description Of The Tool:

Students will use a structured worksheet to analyze both a photograph and an excerpt from *Citizens Plus (Red Paper)*. The activity is organized into three parts to support a gradual development of understanding. Students begin with visual source analysis, closely observing the image and generating initial interpretations and questions. They then read the primary source and make connections between the ideas presented in the Red Paper and the photograph. Finally, students engage in primary source analysis through a series of guiding questions aligned with the guideposts of the historical thinking concept of significance. These questions prompt students to consider change, perspective, and ongoing relevance. This structured approach helps students organize their thinking and connect visual and written evidence to build a deeper understanding of the historical significance.

Pedagogical Purpose:

This scaffolded worksheet supports the development of historical thinking by guiding students from initial observation to deeper interpretation using the concept of historical significance. The structured progression from image analysis to primary source analysis encourages students to move beyond description and begin evaluating why this moment matters. By organizing their thinking through targeted questions, students are prompted to consider how significance is connected to change and what the source reveals about broader issues. They also examine how meaning is constructed through perspective and how significance can vary across time and groups. This carefully structured approach supports students in developing evidence-based interpretations while also encouraging critical reflection on whose perspectives are represented.

and why they matter. As a result, the worksheet functions as a cognitive tool that helps students build more thoughtful and conceptually grounded historical understanding.

Section 5. Scholarly Rationale for Pedagogical Design

This learning activity focuses on helping students develop historical thinking by working directly with a primary source. Research in history education suggests that students understand history more deeply when they analyze evidence themselves rather than only reading summaries of events. The concept of historical significance encourages students to ask why certain events or documents matter and how they have shaped later developments. Seixas and Morton (2013) argue that historical thinking concepts help students move beyond memorizing facts and instead consider the impact, consequences, and ongoing relevance of historical events (pp. 6-17). Using *Citizen Plus* (1970) as the main source allows students to examine an Indigenous response to the federal government's 1969 White Paper and to consider why this debate became an important moment in the history of Indigenous rights in Canada. Working with the document encourages students to interpret perspective, context, and consequences when assessing historical significance.

The lesson is also structured to support students as they interpret both visual and written sources. Wineburg (2001) notes that historical thinking requires students to question evidence and consider how sources reflect certain perspectives and contexts (pp. 3-13). For this reason, the activity begins with the analysis of a photograph of Harold Cardinal before students move to reading the *Citizen Plus* document. Barton and Levstik (2004) note that examining historical issues through multiple perspectives helps students understand that historical interpretation is shaped by differing experiences and viewpoints (pp. 188–194). The visual organizer further supports this process by guiding students from initial observation toward deeper analysis of the primary source. By linking the photograph with the written document, students are encouraged to consider how different types of evidence contribute to understanding the significance of Indigenous political activism during this period.

Citations:

Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Nelson Education.

Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Temple University Press.