

Historical Thinking Concept: Historical Significance in Canadian History

Tridib Datta

Introduction to Historical Thinking Concept and Historical Significance

Not every event from the past is remembered. Historians choose whether historical occurrences, figures, and concepts are significant enough to be examined and discussed. We refer to this process as historical significance. When something has an impact on people, both then and afterward, it becomes significant. Sam Wineburg says that studying history requires serious consideration of the evidence and significance rather than merely memorizing information. One of the first steps in that process is to decide what is important. Peter Seixas clarifies that criteria, not subjective judgment, determine relevance (2004). Knowing historical significance enables thinking critically rather than memorizing dates, asking why some stories are recounted while others are not, and recognizing the connections between historical events and present-day issues.

How Historical Significance Supports This Expectation and Curricular Alignment

Grade: 10 History, specifically looking into Canadian History since World War I (CHC2D).

Historical significance directly enhances students' capacity to fulfill Expectation A1, "historical inquiry: use the historical inquiry process and the concepts of historical thinking when investigating aspects of Canadian history since 1914" (2018), specifically looking at A1.1 to "formulate different types of questions to guide investigations into issues, events, and/or developments in Canadian history since 1914 (e.g., factual questions: What were the provisions of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923?" (2018) by providing them with an organized method to determine the relevance of their historical inquiries. Students learn to judge other events, like Confederation or Indigenous resistance, that had the biggest effect instead of treating all events as equally important. Students can use criteria like impact, depth, and longevity to back up their

decisions based on the work of Seixas and Morton. This is in line with inquiry-based learning because students have to find evidence and explain why they reached their conclusions. By incorporating historical significance into inquiry tasks, educators facilitate students' progression from recalling facts to interpreting the reasons behind remembering specific events and constructing narratives (2004).

Teacher Note:

Historical thinking teaches students to use evidence to organize information and question missing voices, showing that history is an active interpretation rather than just a list of facts. It encourages evidence-based reasoning during inquiry tasks, helps students prioritize and organize information meaningfully, promotes critical reflection on whose stories are included or excluded, and reinforces that history is an interpretive discipline, not just a fixed record.

Worked Example for Learners

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which connected eastern and western Canada, was completed in 1885. It was constructed by thousands of labourers, many of them Chinese, who endured discrimination and hazardous working conditions. Images in the document below titled “Worked Example for Learners Images.”

Question: Was the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway historically significant?

We will use three criteria from Peter Seixas and Tom Morton:

1. Impact (How many people were affected?)
2. Depth (How strongly were people affected?)
3. Durability (How long did the effects last?)

Create a final claim. For example, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway had profound, long-lasting repercussions on Canada and its citizens, making it a historically significant event.

Extending the Thinking: A historian might also ask the following:

- Whose perspectives are missing from this story?
- Why were Chinese workers' contributions often overlooked in the past?
- How might Indigenous communities view the railway differently?

This example shows how to use explicit historical reasoning by making the criteria for significance clear and organized. Instead of asking students to make unsupported opinions, they are led through the process of forming a historical judgment step-by-step.

Pedagogically, this example demonstrates how to apply disciplinary criteria (impact, depth, durability) in a concrete case. It also incorporates contextualization, helping students situate the CPR within broader themes like nation-building and colonial expansion. This helps encourage perspective-taking, aligning with Wineburg's emphasis on questioning sources and recognizing multiple viewpoints, and can be used as a think-aloud model, followed by guided or independent practice (e.g., students evaluate another event like Confederation or the Indian Act).

This means, in the classroom, a teacher might pause after each criterion and ask students to suggest evidence and use the images as prompts for observation and inference. Following this, educators can extend the activity into a short writing task: *"Do you agree that the CPR is historically significant? Why or why not?"*

Visual or Interactive Components: ONE and TWO

One:

Student Graphic Organizer

HISTORICAL EVENT / PERSON / IDEA:

STEP 1: WHAT HAPPENED?

(Brief description in 1–2 sentences)

STEP 2: TEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE

IMPACT (How many people were affected?)

- Who was affected?

- How widespread was it?

✓ Rating: ☐ Low ☐ Medium ☐ High

DEPTH (How strongly were people affected?)

- How serious were the changes?

- Did it change lives in big ways?

✓ Rating: ☐ Low ☐ Medium ☐ High

DURABILITY (How long did it matter?)

- Did effects last over time?

- Does it still matter today?

✓ Rating: ☐ Low ☐ Medium ☐ High

STEP 3: MAKE A JUDGMENT

Is this historically significant?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Maybe

Explain your reasoning (use evidence!):

STEP 4: PERSPECTIVE CHECK

- Who might disagree with your judgment?

- Why?

Two:

“Human Continuum Line” Activity

1. Label one side of the classroom "Highly Significant."
Label the other "Not Significant."
2. Give students an event (e.g., building of the CPR, a local protest, a law).
3. Students:
 - Think individually about the impact, depth, and durability
 - Physically place themselves along the line
4. Students explain their position using: impact, depth, and durability
5. Allow students to move if persuaded by others' arguments.

This makes historical thinking visible, social, and debatable.

Teacher Note:

This tool is designed to reflect research that shows structured visual supports help students grasp complex disciplinary thinking. It works by making thinking visible. Students don't just give opinions, they follow a structured reasoning path. It then builds disciplinary habits by reinforcing criteria-based judgment, aligning with Peter Seixas's framework. Importantly, it supports all learners by reducing cognitive overload and helps struggling learners engage in higher-order thinking. It also builds skills in revision of thinking by showing students that historical understanding involves reconsidering and refining interpretations.

Scholarly Rationale

This teaching tool was made to help students, specifically grade 10 students, understand the idea of historical significance in a way that is both easy for them to understand and based on scholarly work in the field. Based on the work of Seixas and Morton, who say that historical thinking concepts help students move from just remembering facts to using evidence and reasoning to make sense of them (2004). By focusing on significance, the resource brings to the front a basic question in historical research: what do we choose to remember and why?

The explanation was written in clear, student-friendly language on purpose, but it still had to be accurate. Instead of simplifying the idea into subjective judgment, the explanation stresses criteria (impact, depth, durability), which shows that historical significance is built through logical argument. Putting events in context and seeing things from different points of view, the example not only uses criteria but also makes students think about whose points of view are included or left out. Students learn more

about history when they actively interpret stories instead of just listening to them. Beginners learn better when they have structured tools that show how experts think. Tools help students remember a repeatable reasoning process by breaking the idea down into separate but related criteria. Finally, history teaching combines disciplinary thought with statutory curriculum objectives. By incorporating historical importance into an inquiry-based expectation, the resource demonstrates how conceptual knowledge complements, rather than replaces, content learning.

The teaching tool was made to help students go from a "limited" understanding of how history is prioritized, where they might rely on personal preference or unexamined faith in a textbook, to a "powerful" understanding. The project requires students to judge events based on whether they had "deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time" by focusing on Guidepost 1 (2013). The reason for this choice is that students need to stop seeing history as a list of facts and start using measurable change to explain why things are important. The tool gives students a way to explain why some developments are worth studying and others aren't by using a worked example that focuses on these criteria.

The interactive parts of the tool are also based on the idea that historical significance is "constructed" and "varies over time and from group to group." The tool doesn't teach students that significance is a permanent or natural part of an event. Instead, it shows them how it is built through narrative and context. This connection to Guidepost 3 and Guidepost 4 helps students see how different historical accounts can focus on different stories (2013). Finally, by including Guidepost 2, the tool helps students understand that events are important if they "reveal" something and shed light on "enduring or emerging issues" in both the past and the present (2013).

Overall, this initiative is based on the idea that history education should promote reasoned judgment, evidence utilization, and interpretive awareness. Each component was created to promote these objectives by explicit modelling, controlled practice, and chances for reflection, ensuring that students view history as a dynamic process of meaning-making rather than a static body of knowledge.

Contribution and Legacy

This teaching tool has been made as a practical classroom resource to help the teaching of historical thinking in grade ten. By focusing on the concept of historical significance and presenting it through clear explanation, systematic modelling, and an adjustable visual organizer, this resource strives to make disciplinary thinking visible and accessible for learners and educators.

Peter Seixas emphasizes that historical thought is a dynamic discourse about how we perceive the past, rather than a fixed set of solutions. This resource is meant to contribute to that discourse by providing a tool that others can adapt, critique, and expand upon. This work acknowledges that teaching resources gain value through usage and adaptation. Future teacher candidates may change the organizer, use different historical examples, or incorporate digital technologies to increase participation.

Practicing educators can incorporate it into inquiry modules or use it to guide discussions about who remembers and why. By sharing this work, the project expands beyond individual courses and contributes to its ability to help students acquire critical, evidence-based understandings of the past. It also importantly allows educators to make historical thinking processes more accessible, explicit, and relevant.





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Canadian Railway

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References:

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The "Generating Powerful Understandings" chart is a specific component of Chapter 1 in the following textbook: Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Nelson Education.