

Past and Perspective: History in the Eyes of Those Who Came Before Us

Historical Thinking Mentorship Project

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Section 1. Historical Thinking Concept

Chosen concept: Historical Perspective

Student explanation for learners:

When you take a trip down memory lane, you likely perceive those recollections through two different lenses: a “now” perspective (i.e., how you feel at the current moment thinking back to the event) and a “then” perspective (i.e., how you felt in the moment that event occurred). In the discipline of history, we deal with the second lens, also known as historical perspective. Peter Sexias and Tom Morton (2013) coined the “Big Six” historical thinking concepts that guide how we, as a society, should engage with history. One of the central pillars of historical thinking is historical perspective. The question that this concept explores is, “How can we better understand the people of the past?” Historical perspective is a significant part of a historian’s work because in order to make sense and meaning of the past, one must metaphorically put themselves in the shoes of the real people who experienced those events.

There are five guideposts underlying how to analyze historical perspective (Sexias & Morton, 2013). First, remember that there is a huge difference between the worldviews of the past and the present. For example, consider how your grandparents’ generation may have viewed issues related to racial equality in a different way than what is commonly regarded as the standard today in Canada. Second, it is imperative to avoid presentism. Analytical presentism occurs when concepts are retroprojected into the past. Ethical presentism is a form of analytical presentism whereby ethical norms are retroprojected. Perspectival presentism occurs when people study the past through the lens of present concerns. We must humanize the people in history as actors in their own right with their unique way of thinking, living, and behaving. We should never evaluate people of the past by today’s standards. Third, because people in the past thought differently from us, we must study them in their historical contexts, addressing both time and place. Think about it like this: considering the historical contexts, people living in the 1860s in the United States of America will have a very different experience and outlook on life compared to those living in the 1940s in China. Fourth, it is okay to disagree with historical actors; however, we should make factually accurate and evidence-based inferences to find reasons to support the “why” and the “how” of the actions and beliefs of people in the past. It is also important to note the limitations, as we are studying the past without having actually lived it. Fifth, people—historically and presently speaking—are not a monolith. Many disagreed with each other based on aspects of their identities. This diversity provides a rich account of our past, and it

is key to understanding conflict and change in history. By probing the past through employing historical perspective with these five guideposts, historians get a better understanding of how humans survived and thrived.

Section 2. Curricular Alignment

Grade level: Grade 8

Ontario curriculum Overall Expectation:

A2. Inquiry: Perspectives in the New Nation

assess the impact of some key social, economic, and political factors, including social, economic, and/or political inequalities, on various groups and communities, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, and on the creation and expansion of the Dominion of Canada, between 1850 and 1890 (**FOCUS ON:** *Cause and Consequence; Historical Perspective*).

Teacher facing curricular note:

Through this Overall Expectation, students are required to move beyond simply identifying historical events and actors, but rather develop a fuller comprehension as to how and why the Dominion of Canada functioned as it did from 1850 to 1890. Integrating historical perspective within curricular understanding demands that students deepen their analysis, as they must consider historical context when examining the perspectives of historical actors during the period. Thereby, students have the ability to establish the fundamental shift between current and past ideologies, thus striving to avoid various forms of presentism. Furthermore, by adopting the perspective of historical actors, diverse perspectives can be understood, which allows students to infer knowledge, beliefs and values that explain specific historical actors' actions and decisions. Through a student's engagement in such components of perspective, comparison between differing historical actors can be realized, and even shared understandings can consequently emerge. As a result, students are able to engage in critical inquiry through perspective, which allows them to make greater meaning from nuanced understandings of human experiences. Ultimately, students will grasp the competing interests and inequalities during the Confederation era of Canada, especially with regard to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

Section 3. Primary Source and Worked Example

Primary source selection:

Métis Perspective

Louis Riel, *Speech to Congress During Trial*

<https://greatcanadianspeeches.ca/2019/11/16/louis-riel-speech-to-the-jury-1885/>

This source exhibits Louis Riel's speech to the jury during his trial in 1885 regarding the Northwest Resistance, which followed the Red River Resistance after Riel's exile in the United States. In this speech, he refuses to plead insanity and doubles down on how the westward expansion has afflicted Métis people, especially critiquing the legislation that has never represented the voices of Métis communities. He highlights that the Red River Resistance and Northwest Resistance were a response to the Crown's neglect of Métis people, resulting in many starvations in the Prairies.

AND

Crown/Government Perspective

Dominion of Canada, *Manitoba Act (1870)*

<https://primarydocuments.ca/manitoba-act-1870/>

<https://gladue.usask.ca/node/2500>

This source showcases the *Manitoba Act* of 1870, which sought to resolve the Red River Resistance. It was passed to establish Manitoba as a definitively Métis province, with provisions to protect the French language, preserve the Catholic religion, and allot land to Métis families. Nonetheless, the process of land distribution took more than a decade, and the locations and amount of land were often modified from the agreed-upon value in the Act, leading to many unfulfilled promises and frustrated Métis people.

Context for learners:

These two sources exemplify two different perspectives on the uprisings related to the Crown and Métis people during the late 19th century. The Red River Resistance (1869-1870) occurred in what is now known as Manitoba, in the Red River Colony, as a reaction to the transfer of a vast territory of Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada. Métis farmers and hunters who have called the place home for so long feared losing their culture and land rights under the Canadian government's control and thus decided to fight back. A provisional government was created by the Métis people to negotiate with the Parliament. There was a period of chaos and violence, especially with the death of English-speaking settler Thomas Scott, who opposed the provisional government. The Red River Resistance led to the creation of the province of Manitoba (Bumsted, 2021). Over a decade later, Riel left exile in the United States in 1884 and once again was the centre of another uprising, this time called the Northwest Resistance (1885). He urged dissatisfied people in the North-West to unite and make a case

against Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald's government, which had failed to address their grievances. The Northwest Resistance's end was marked by the enforcement of Canadian law in the West and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples living in the Prairies. Riel was also convicted, tried, and hanged as a consequence (Beal & McLeod, 2021). When read together, these two documents provide a rich account of the diversity of perspectives and complexity of conflicts in Canada in the late 1800s.

A note on terminology: in various sources, you may encounter the Red River Resistance and Northwest Resistance being referred to as the Red River Rebellion and the Northwest Rebellion, respectively. Many Indigenous Peoples do not interpret the events that happened as a "rebellion." Hence, I have chosen to use the term "resistance" to write in accordance with the elements of Indigenous Style (Younging, 2025, p. 90-91).

Modelled historical thinking:

To integrate historical perspective into the students' use of these sources, we would do a class "Playing with Perspective" activity in a lesson on Indigenous and Crown relations during the Confederation period. Before the task, teachers will supplement historical context for the sources, and they will be read together as a class afterwards. Questions and comments are not given at this stage, as these are reserved for the stations below. In the interactive "Playing with Perspective" learning experience, the teacher would create three different stations, thus splitting the class into three equal groups. Firstly, the class would interact with the *Manitoba Act*. Each station would display one question:

1. STEP IN: Given what you know from your close reading of the text, what do you think the author(s) might feel, believe, know, or experience? (10 minutes)
2. STEP OUT: What else would you like or need to learn in order to understand the author's or authors' perspective better (e.g., questions, clarifications, etc.)? (10 minutes)
3. STEP BACK: Given your exploration of this author's or authors' perspective so far, what do you notice about your own perspective and what it takes to understand somebody else's perspective? (10 minutes)

Students at each table would respond to the question on a sticky note, which would correspond with the assigned "stick note colour" of their group (to identify the work completed by each group). Students would write their interpretations and/or answers to the prompt and place their sticky note on the chart paper where the question would be visible. Students would then rotate to one of the other two stations and repeat the same instructions. Not only would students interact with the historical perspective of the source, but students would also be encouraged to engage in the perspective of their peers, based on the sticky notes left by their classmates. The class would rotate through each question to ensure each group has the

opportunity to respond to peer perspectives as well. Once the students had engaged with each of the questions while reflecting on the perspective of the *Manitoba Act*, the same stations would be repeated, but instead with Riel's Speech.

This activity is adapted from Facing History & Ourselves "Playing with Perspective" learning experience.

Teacher note:

This paired-source activity can be used instructionally to help students actively construct historical perspective by comparing how different groups experienced the same events. The teacher would emphasize that neither source is “neutral,” guiding students to closely read both Louis Riel’s Speech to the Jury (1885) and the Manitoba Act (1870) as products of specific viewpoints shaped by power, identity, and context. Through the “Step In, Step Out, Step Back” prompts, students are likely to generate responses that identify Riel’s frustration with government neglect and Métis suffering, while also recognizing the Act’s stated intentions to protect Métis rights alongside its failures in implementation. Some students may initially take the documents at face value, but peer interaction at the stations encourages them to question omissions, contradictions, and whose voices are missing. This process supports conceptual learning by moving students beyond simple comprehension toward interpreting cause and consequence and recognizing how historical narratives are constructed, ultimately helping them understand that Canada’s expansion involved competing perspectives, unequal power relationships, and differing lived experiences.

Section 4. Visual Accompaniment to the Primary Source

Type of visual or organizer: Graphic Organizer

Description of the tool:

Students will use a structured graphic organizer divided into four sections: *Observation*, *Context*, *Cause and Consequence*, and *Historical Perspective*. In the **Observation** section, students record specific details they notice in the primary source (e.g., language, tone, imagery, or key events). In the **Context** section, they identify when and why the source was created, and who created it. The **Cause and Consequence** section prompts students to connect the source to broader social, economic, or political factors between 1850 and 1890, including impacts on different groups such as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Finally, in the **Historical Perspective** section, students analyze whose voices are represented or missing, and how the experiences or viewpoints of different groups may shape the meaning of the source. This

organizer guides students step-by-step from basic comprehension to deeper analysis and interpretation.

Pedagogical purpose:

This visual organizer supports historical thinking by helping students systematically break down a primary source and move beyond surface-level observations. By structuring their thinking into clear categories, students learn to connect specific details to broader historical causes and consequences, while also considering diverse perspectives. The inclusion of a dedicated *Historical Perspective* section encourages students to recognize bias, identify underrepresented voices, and understand how experiences differed among groups during the formation of Canada. This scaffolded approach promotes critical inquiry by guiding students from noticing and questioning to interpreting and evaluating, ultimately strengthening their ability to construct informed, evidence-based historical understandings.

Primary Source Analysis Graphic Organizer: Historical Perspective (1850–1890)

Section	Guiding Questions	Student Notes
1. Observation (What do you notice?)	- What words, phrases, or images stand out? - What is happening in the source? - Who is shown or mentioned? - What details seem important?	
2. Context (When and why was this created?)	- Who created this source? - When was it created? - What was happening in Canada at this time? - What might have been the purpose of this source?	
3. Cause and Consequence (What are the motivations behind the historical actor, and what were the results of their actions?)	- What social, economic, or political factors are connected to this source? - What events or conditions led to its creation? - What were the short-term and long-term impacts?	

	- How did this affect different groups (e.g., First Nations, Métis, Inuit, settlers)?	
4. Historical Perspective (How does the unique historical context–time and setting–add meaning to the source?)	- Whose perspective is shown in this source? - Whose voices are missing or underrepresented? - How might different groups view this event differently? - How do beliefs, values, or experiences shape this perspective?	
5. Interpretation (What does this mean?)	- What is the overall message of the source? - What can we learn about this time period? - How does this source help us understand Canada's development (1850–1890)?	

Section 5. Scholarly Rationale for Pedagogical Design

Scholarly rationale:

When determining our instructional decisions, we referred to Peter Seixas's work on historical perspective-taking. In his scholarship, Seixas stresses the errors of presentism and empathy. He states how presentism actively distorts historical comprehension, as judgements are conducted through modern values and belief systems, whereas solely utilizing an empathetic framework risks moral judgements according to current standards (Seixas 2004). Instead, Seixas emphasizes the importance of grounding perspective in direct historical evidence, as this eliminates presentist imposition and alternatively allows students to contextualize perspective through historical fundamental structures and processes (Seixas 2004). As a result, our pedagogical choices aligned with Seixas' scholarship. Firstly, we chose two sources to ensure historical evidence remained the forefront of our perspective activity. In the consultation of both Crown and Métis viewpoints, students are able to better comprehend bias, contrasting opinions and deep complexities, thus allowing greater engagement with historical evidence. Secondly, our visual accompaniment supplements such learning expectations, as historical thinking solely through primary source material is emphasized with evidence-based critical inquiry at the forefront of student understanding. Finally, with the perspective activity itself, exploration of

perspective is again grounded directly within historical evidence. Both presentism and moral judgements are counteracted through the activity's concentration on the contextualization of historical actors and awareness of personal biases.

In addition, our pedagogical choices draw from the ideas of pragmatism, of which John Dewey (1859-1952) was an educational philosopher. In his beliefs, he argued for experiential learning based on active, democratic, and rooted in real-world experience in lieu of passive memorization. He believed in progressivism, particularly that social progress and reform can be achieved through education (Hildebrand, 2024). His theory grounds our historical perspective activity. As student groups are in each station, they interact with various aspects of the two distinct sources they are viewing. The goal is to have students grasp, in its historical context, why the Métis people resisted against westward settler expansion and the Crown's inaction, as well as why the Canadian government enacted the *Manitoba Act* (as well as perhaps why they did not follow through with many of its promises). By engaging with historical perspective, students can think deeply about the motivations behind these historical actors. Simultaneously, as student groups are leaving behind their sticky notes, they also get a chance to view the perspectives of other students, situating themselves in the present and how, in that unique moment, their feelings, questions, and reflections about the two sources. Through analyzing the source, students are actively engaged in historical perspective-taking. Because experiential learning opportunities like field trips and real artifacts may be costly in a classroom sense, having students rotate in learning stations provides a more accessible alternative. Students still benefit from the real-world application portion through their personal reflections regarding the source and guiding questions that allow them to, albeit briefly and "superficially," take the authors' perspectives. It is noteworthy that we did not use the debate format to teach historical perspective because it is insensitive to try to justify rationales for cultural genocide. Instead, our "Playing with Perspective" activity seeks to identify motivations, not justifications, of historical actors. We also understand the complexity of perspective-taking, which is why we did not structure our activity for students to roleplay as a person of colour in the past or a white settler. By allowing students to interact actively with the perspectives of people from the past who were highly involved in the Red River Resistance and Northwest Resistance, they are practicing aspects of the pragmatism that Dewey was a proponent of.

Citations:

See the page below.

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