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Historical Thinking Mentorship Project: Understanding Historical Perspectives

Section 1: Historical Thinking Concept

Historical Thinking Concept

The historical thinking concept, historical perspectives, means trying to understand how people in the past saw their world, rather than judging them only by today's standards. Historians ask what people at the time knew, believed, and valued, and what choices they thought they had. This can be challenging because, as researcher Sam Wineburg explains, we naturally see the past through a modern lens. To think like historians, we have to work against that instinct and place events in their historical context, the social norms, knowledge, and circumstances that shaped people's decisions. Peter Seixas and other scholars emphasize that understanding this context helps us make fairer and more accurate interpretations of history. Taking historical perspectives does not mean agreeing with people in the past, but it does mean trying to understand them on their own terms before making judgments.

Student Explanation for Learners

Historical perspective-taking means trying to understand how people in the past saw their world. Instead of judging them by today's standards, we ask: What did they know? What did they believe? What choices did they have? This can be hard because we naturally think using modern ideas. Historians like Sam Wineburg and Peter Seixas explain that we need to think about the context, what life was like back then, to understand why people acted the way they did. It does not mean we agree with them, but it helps us understand them better.

Section 2: Curricular Alignment

Grade level

Grade 10

Ontario Curriculum Overall Expectation

Developing an understanding of historical perspectives supports the A1. Historical Inquiry expectation for Ontario's Grade 10 destreamed History course. This expectation entails students "use the historical inquiry process and the concepts of historical thinking when investigating aspects of Canadian history since 1914," helping them to interpret

historical evidence through the viewpoints of people in the past. When students consider the beliefs, values, and conditions that shaped individuals' experiences, they move beyond simply describing sources to analyzing them in context. This aligns with the historical inquiry process, which requires students to examine evidence, consider multiple perspectives, and develop informed interpretations. As a result, understanding historical perspectives helps students think more critically about sources and avoid judging the past only through modern viewpoints, strengthening their ability to construct well-supported historical understanding.

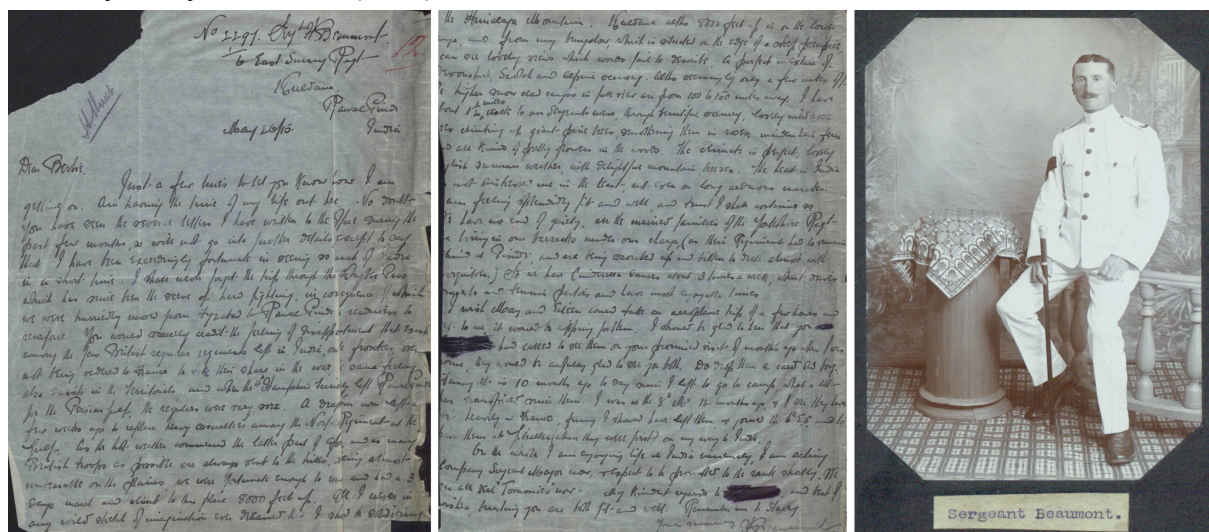
Teacher Facing Curricular Note

This learning focus supports the A1: Historical Inquiry expectation by using the historical thinking concept of historical perspectives to improve students' interpretation of historical evidence. As Stéphane Lévesque argues, strong history teaching combines disciplinary concepts with curriculum expectations so students learn not only what happened in the past, but also how to think historically. Historical perspective-taking helps students understand that people in the past had different beliefs, values, and conditions that shaped how they saw the world. This supports A1 by encouraging students to analyze sources in context, recognize different viewpoints, and avoid judging the past only from a modern perspective. In doing so, students strengthen their ability to use evidence to build informed and contextualized historical interpretations.

Section 3: Primary Source and Worked Example

Primary Source

Letter by Harry Beaumont (1915)



Transcript:

"Dear Bertie,

Just a few lines to let you know how I am getting on. Am having the time of my life out here.

No doubt you have seen the several letters I have written to the office during the past few months, so will not go into further details, except to say that I have been exceedingly fortunate in seeing so much of India in a short time. I shall never forget my trip through the Khyber Pass which has since been the scene of hard fighting, one consequence of which we were hurriedly moved from Fyzabad to Rawalpindi in readiness to reinforce.

You would scarcely credit the feeling of disappointment that exists among the few British regular regiments left in India, over not being ordered to France to take their share in the war. The same feeling also exists in the Territorials... A dragoon then left a few weeks ago to replace heavy casualties among the Norfolk regiment at the Gulf.

As the hot weather commenced the latter part of April, and as many British troops as possible are always sent to the hills (being almost unbearable on the plains), we are fortunate enough to go, and had a three days' march and climb to this place 8,000 feet up. Well I never in any wild stretch of imagination ever dreamed that I should be soldiering in the Himalayan mountains.

Kuldana, although 8,000 feet up is on the lower Himalaya, and from my bungalow, which is situated on the edge of a steep precipice, I can see lovely views which words fail to describe, a perfect mixture of Devonshire, Scotch and Alpine scenery. Although seemingly only a few miles off, the higher snow clad ranges in full view are from 100 to 150 miles away. I have about 1½ miles trek to our Sergeant's mess, through beautiful scenery, lovely wild rose bushes climbing up giant pink trees, smothering them in roses, maiden hair fern and all kinds of pretty flowers in the woods. The climate is perfect, lovely English summer weather, with delightful mountain breezes. The heat in India has not distressed me in the least, not even on long arduous marches. I am feeling splendidly fit and well, and trust I shall continue so. We have no end of gaiety; all the married families of the Yorkshire regiment are living in our barracks under our charge, (as their regiments had to remain behind at Pindi, and are being bitten to death almost with mosquitoes.) So we have Cinderella dances about three times a week, whist drives, racquet and tennis parties and have most enjoyable times.

I wish May and Eileen could take an aeroplane trip of a few hours and get to me, it would be ripping for them. I should be glad to hear that you had called to see them on your promised visit of months ago when I was home, they would be awfully glad to see you both. Do drop them a card old boy. Fancy it is 10 months ago today since I left to go to camp, what a lot has transpired since then. I was in the 8th Middlesex 12 months ago, and I see they have lost heavily in France, funny I should have left them, and joined the 6th East Surrey and to pass them at Gibraltar (where they were first) on my way to India.

On the whole I am enjoying life in India immensely; I am acting Company Sergeant Major now, and expect to be promoted to the rank shortly. We are all 'Tommies' now. Trusting you are both fit and well. Remember me to Stacey. Yours sincerely,

H. Beaumont"

Context for Learners

This letter was written during World War I, when Britain had soldiers stationed all over its empire, including in India. The writer, H. Beaumont, is a British soldier serving in India, which was part of the British Empire. During this time, many soldiers believed it was their duty and honour to fight for their country, which helps explain why he feels excited about war and disappointed not to be sent to France. The letter also reflects the conditions of military life, such as moving between locations, dealing with climate differences, and socializing with other soldiers and families. Understanding this context helps us see why Beaumont describes his experience in a positive and adventurous way, even though we might view war differently today.

Modelled Historical Thinking

1. Consider the Historical Perspective

Begin by focusing on how the writer H. Beaumont understood his world at the time he wrote the letter. Historical thinking requires setting aside present day values and assumptions. Instead of judging his words based on what we know now, try to understand his thoughts and feelings within his own time period. This means asking what seemed normal, acceptable, or exciting to someone living during World War I.

2. Examine the Historical Context

Next, place the letter within its historical setting. Beaumont was a British soldier during World War I, a time when ideas such as duty, honour, and patriotism were strongly emphasized. When he writes that he is having “the time of my life” and feels disappointed about not going to France, it may seem surprising from a modern perspective. Today, war is often associated with loss and trauma. However, at the time, many soldiers believed going to war was a chance to prove bravery, serve their country, and gain respect. Understanding these beliefs helps explain why Beaumont viewed his situation positively.

3: Identify Perspective and Bias

Then, look closely at how Beaumont describes India. He compares the landscape to places like Devonshire and Scotch scenery. This shows that he is using familiar British references to understand a place that is not his home. His descriptions reveal a colonial perspective shaped by the British Empire. This means he is interpreting India through his

own cultural background rather than trying to understand it on its own terms. Recognizing this bias helps us see that his account is only one viewpoint.

4: Recognize Position and Privilege

It is also important to think about Beaumont's position as a British soldier. His focus on comfort, scenery, and leisure suggests that he is experiencing India in a way that many local people would not. As part of the British military during a time of empire, he likely had access to resources and freedoms that gave him a more comfortable experience. This position of privilege influences what he notices and what he chooses to write about, shaping the overall tone of the letter.

5: Consider What Is Unknown or Missing

Finally, think about what Beaumont does not know. He writes with confidence and excitement, but he has no way of knowing how the war will unfold or how deadly it will become. This highlights an important part of historical thinking, which is understanding that people in the past did not have the same knowledge or hindsight that we have today. Their decisions and attitudes were based only on what they knew at the time, which can make their perspectives very different from ours.

Teacher Note

This example works well pedagogically because it provides a clear, accessible primary source that contains strong evidence of historical perspective. In the classroom, teachers can guide students to annotate the letter by identifying language that reflects attitudes shaped by empire, military culture, and wartime expectations. It can be used in small-group discussions or structured inquiry questions that prompt students to compare Beaumont's perspective with modern understandings of war and colonialism. This supports the development of historical thinking skills by helping students practice contextualization, perspective-taking, and evidence-based interpretation.

Section 4: Visual Accompaniment to the Primary Source

Visual Organizer Worksheet

Source Analysis Chart:

	Value / Strengths	Weakness / Limitations
Origin of Source (who?, when?, where?)		
Purpose of Source (why?)		
Context of Source (what was happening then?)		
Content in the Source (what does it actually say?)		

Description of the Tool

This is a structured four-category analysis chart designed for examining sources. The organizer breaks down a source into four essential analytical categories: (1) origin, (2) purpose, (3) context, and (4) content. The origin category asks who created the source, when, and where. The purpose category investigates why the source was made and for whom. The context category places the source within the historical circumstances surrounding its creation. Finally, the content category examines what the source actually says, shows, or argues. Then, the chart promotes students to consider each category's values/strengths versus weaknesses/limitations. The chart can be used as a printable worksheet, a digital template, or a discussion guide. It is also meant to act as a scaffold for further learning and assignments, such as an annotated bibliography, a source analysis, or a research paper.

Pedagogical Purpose

This tool is designed to develop historical thinking skills in students. Through the origin and purpose category, students learn to ask who made a source and why, rather than taking the source at face value. The context category trains students to place the source within its own time and place, helping them avoid presentism, or judging the past by today's standards. The content category encourages close reading of what the source explicitly says and, just as importantly, what it leaves out.

The value and limitations columns serve a distinct and essential pedagogical purpose: they move students beyond binary thinking, where a source is simply labeled “good” or “bad,” “reliable” or “unreliable,” toward a more contextual judgment. When students are asked to identify the value of a source's origin, for example, they learn that a source created by an eyewitness has genuine strength for understanding immediate reactions, even if that same eyewitness is emotionally biased. Similarly, when students identify limitations, they learn that a source's weakness is not necessarily a reason to discard it but rather a clue about what the source cannot tell them.

The tool is adaptable for middle school through undergraduate history courses, and teachers can use it to assess whether students can independently identify both strengths and limitations of a source, a key skill in evidence-based reasoning.

Section 5: Scholarly Rationale for Pedagogical Design

Scholarly Rationale

The pedagogical design of this learning tool is grounded in research demonstrating that historical thinking requires explicit, scaffolded instruction rather than implicit acquisition. Wineburg (2001) established that contextualization, the ability to situate a source in its historical time and place, is deeply unnatural for students, who instinctively read the past through presentist frameworks. First, the student-facing explanation of historical perspectives deliberately avoids abstract definitions in favour of concrete, actionable questions to reflect Barton and Levstik's (2004) findings that students learn disciplinary reasoning more effectively when it is framed as a set of inquiry practices rather than declarative knowledge. Second, the Beaumont letter was selected because it contains productive tension: a soldier enjoying war conflicts with students' modern assumptions, which makes presentism visible and therefore teachable. Third, the modelled historical thinking section demonstrates the reasoning process aloud, a technique Lévesque (2008) identifies as essential for making expert disciplinary strategies accessible to new learners.

The source analysis chart operationalizes Seixas and Morton's (2013) argument that historical perspective-taking requires systematic attention to origin, purpose, context, and content before interpretation can begin. The inclusion of value/limitations columns serves a specific pedagogical function drawn from Barton and Levstik's (2004) work on evidence-based reasoning: students often treat sources as either reliable or unreliable, but disciplinary historians understand that every source has both strengths and limitations depending on the question asked. By requiring students to identify both for each category, the chart disrupts binary thinking and teaches that limitations do not disqualify a source but rather clarify what it can and cannot tell us. The chart's structure also embeds the historical inquiry process from Ontario's curriculum by moving students systematically from

observation (content, origin) to analysis (purpose, context) to judgment (value/limitations). Together, these design decisions ensure that students are not simply learning about historical perspectives but actively practicing the disciplined reasoning that defines historical inquiry.

Citations

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